

"You mean we're going to chase those fobbers up Roche's Alley and jockey for position between the colapstars?"

"Give that woman the chocolate redstick," Kalahari said, and even the businesslike Whitey chuckled. Kalahari toed the inship comm. "Pransy! Getcher little pale tail up here pres. I want my best comp on duty. Whitey?"

"Ready, Captain. And -- eager!

"All right; jacko. Follow those ships. We are going to meet the monsters!"

SPACEWAYS

#1 OF ALIEN BONDAGE

#2 CORUNDUM'S WOMAN

#3 ESCAPE FROM MACHO

#4 SATANA ENSLAVED

#5 MASTER OF MISFIT

#6 PURRFECT PLUNDER

#7 THE MANHUNTRESS

#8 UNDER TWIN SUNS

#9 IN QUEST OF QALARA

#10 THE YOKE OF SHEN

#11 THE ICE WORLD CONNECTION

#12 STAR SLAVER

#13 JONUTA RISING!

#14 ASSIGNMENT: HELLHOLE

#15 STARSHIP SAPPHIRE

#16 THE PLANET MURDERER

#17 THE CARNADYNE HORDE

#18 RACE ACROSS THE STARS

The poem Scarlet Hills copyright C 1982 by  
Ann Morris; used by permission of the author.

SPACEWAYS #18: RACE ACROSS THE STARS

A Berkley Book / published by arrangement with  
the author

PRINTING HISTORY

Berkley edition! July 1984

All rights reserved.

Copyright C 1984 by John Cleve.

Cover illustration by Ken Barr.

This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part,  
by mimeograph or any other means, without permission.

For information address: The Berkley Publishing Group,  
200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016.

ISBN: 0-425-07024-7

A BERKLEY BOOK TM 757,375

The name "BERKLEY" and the stylized "B" with design  
are trademarks belonging to Berkley Publishing Corporation.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

for Jodie and Rhonda

SCARLET HILLS

Alas, fair ones, my time has come.

I must depart your lovely home—

Seek the bounds of this galaxy

To find what lies beyond.

(chorus)

Scarlet hills and amber skies,

Gentlebeings with loving eyes;

All these I leave to search for a dream

That will cure the wand'rer in me.

You say it must be glamorous

For those who travel out through space.

You know not the dark, endless night

Nor the solitude we face.

(reprise chorus)

I know not of my journey's end

Nor the time nor toll it will have me spend.

But I must see what I've never seen

And know what I've never known.

Scarlet hills and amber skies,

Gentlebeings with loving eyes;

All these I leave to search for a dream

That will cure the wand' rer in me.

—Ann Morris

The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.

—George Bernard Shaw



# 1

why are so many people willing to believe in miracles but not in coincidence? Perhaps they're the same thing: "Oh, what a coincidence — God intervened in your life, too!"

-Marekallian Eks

The tall black-haired man squatted on his haunches behind well-tended shrubbery. When he raised his head from concealment a bit more than seemed necessary, blank gray eyes in a face as dark as his hair studied the scene before him. Collarless, baggy black coveralls left his neck exposed. Something at his throat glinted dimly in the light of an early evening sky.

*Soon most of the light will be below the horizon.*

It emanated from the twin stars Eratosthenes A and B, now nearly set and providing almost as much illumination as a small moon. They were near, exceptionally close to their neighbor stars—a fact that had given name both to this sector of space and its political entity: the Tri-System Accord.

Here the twin suns' closeness made them truly light-givers to each others' planets at night, not merely points the sky.

It would be (relatively) dark on Andor for some time after the twins set. Andor had no natural moon, and its own

sun Arkimedes would not rise for another seven hours. Yet the night held enough light to see by, here at Galaxy center where the hot stars so thickly spattered the night skies. Too, there were the artificial satellite called Kobastation and the great shining shaft of its shuttlelevator.

Light enough to see, but not so much that a man could not hide if he wished. If he was a practiced thief. If he had earned a name and reputation for hiding where others could not.

He waited, his head withdrawn behind the bushes. He waited, his 183-sem\* height crouched and uncramped. He could wait—and had—in this position for many hours with little or no discomfort and no betrayal by cramping muscles. The discipline of Tao Chi, a melding of body and mind that allowed either or both to reach highest potential when required, kept his muscles as relaxed as his mental state.

The similarly-dressed woman beside him was less in harmony with her chi, her life force. Her shorter 168-sem\*\* frame was decidedly cramped. She attempted to calm and control herself, to call on the Tao—the Way. Considering the short length of time she had studied the ancient philosophy, she achieved admirable success.

Even so she found her control less than satisfactory. Her mind kept drifting. She wanted the twin suns to set nearly as much as she wanted to stand and stretch. Furtively she reached up to wipe the sweat beaded on her forehead by the tropically humid night. Hit by an overwhelming need to scratch, she scratched. And wondered: would a shift of position earn her a disapproving look from her companion?

There were, after all, extenuating circumstances.

Her anxiety was lifted by the sudden darkening as the twins slipped below the horizon. Amid the scattered stars

\* 183 centimeters- 6feet, Old Style

\*\* Just over 5 feet 6 inches, Old Style.

the brightest was no star at all, but Andor's nearest planetary neighbor, Toktaga. It too hung just above the edge of Andor, slowly descending.

The man raised his head again. Without glancing at her, he tapped his companion on the shoulder and bade her join him in looking .

Her eyes took a minute to adjust to the reduced light (and her knees almost as long to uncramp). The man had no such problems.

At length she saw clearly the tall wire mesh of the fence that stretched into the distance in both directions. It bore a large sign: *JARANIT FARMS LTD / MAIN COMPOUND*.

She turned a questioning expression on the man. Without turning to her, he nodded. She extracted a pair of dark gloves from the waistband of her coveralls, while he broke the field that melded his upper and lower clothing. He gripped the hem of the upper with both hands and drew it quickly over his head, revealing the black skin of his torso.

Handing the garment to his companion, he bent forward briefly, stretching. . . . A short crackle, followed by a rustling, and a dark shadow seemed to unfold from his back. It divided, grew. A whoosh, a flap, a shrugging of first one Shoulder, then the other, and he stood still again.

Two unipolymer wings stood out from his muscular back.

The woman nodded, this time without looking at him. Her gaze was fixed on the fence. The man's response was to stare upward into the sky. He bent his knees slightly, then hopped up and kept going, the wings moving now. Silently carrying him. Higher than the fence, higher still, till he knew he'd cleared the limits of the electrical warning system that extended above the barrier. Then over, and down inside the compound.

He alighted near a pole on which hung a locked box. From his waistband he took a small instrument and put it work on the box . It popped open in about half a minute.

He studied its interior for long moments before reaching inside with both hands. He worked, making adjustments. After a time he withdrew his hands, paused, went to work again.

When he'd finished he contemplated the box, then turned to the woman waiting outside the fence. He inclined his head. Without waiting for her response, he turned back to close the box.

Her response was instant. Pulling her gloves snug, she made a short run at the fence and leaped up onto it. With booted feet and gloved hands she scaled the mash. As she swung first one leg then the other over the top, her flowing hair caught a glint of starlight. Seemingly a flat dark color in shadow, in starshine it gave off coppery highlights.

Then she was over and down, hurrying to stand with the very black man—and she caught movement with the corner of her eye. A glance showed her two enormous genengineered guard grats. The beasts were silently racing their way.

She reached out to warn the man—unnecessarily. He had already begun to spin, his hand darting to his waist. From a holster melded there he drew a cold blue cylinder of metal. He leveled it at the foremost of the grats. A barely visible beam of light leaped out at the shoulder-high beast. It yelped and its head dropped while it was still amove. The massive head went down and under and the momentum carried the animal's body over it. Down it came, tail-first in the dust with a heavy thump.

Even as it somersaulted, the man turned the stopper on the other. It too yelped, its feet skidding sideways. It plunged onto its side and rolled, feet going over to point the opposite way.

Stunned, the two grats lay still on the dusty field.

The very black man holstered his weapon. The wings folded to lie flat against his back. He took his upper garment

from the woman and donned it.

She looked about to get her bearings. Away to the north at one end of the compound, past immaculate lawns and formal gardens, bulked the mansion of the farm's owner. Few lights glowed in its windows

As She turned back to her partner he extended his arm to the south. She indicated agreement. He paused, turning his head so the gray eyes were aimed straight into her green ones.

He smiled, and the tense, concentrated expression on her face softened in response. She smiled, and both those smiles bore reassurance, more than success. They showed a deep affection that seemed almost to take them out of this place.

Almost. The man turned, pointed again, and started off in the direction away from the house and gardens. His companion followed.

The short, black-haired man squatted on his haunches behind shrubbery. His haunches ached, despite his years of following the Tao. Whether the difficulty lay within him or with the Way itself he did not know, yet. Lately he'd had his doubts about the Way.

A woman even shorter than he crouched by his side. She seemed to experience less difficulty maintaining her position. Strong leg muscles supported her lithe form. She wore a spacefarer's jumpsuit identical to his: four-way stretch black to blend with the night. Her hair was as black as his and her skin a deep nut-brown in the faint light from the twin suns (now nearly set on the opposite side of the Jaranit Farms compound from where they waited).

The man's face bore that which most Galactics lived and died their artificially-lengthened lives without ever seeing. A full beard, black, of perhaps two sems' length at the chin.

As the double star sank from view the two arose and

stretched, grunting under their breaths at the complaints of tired muscles. They looked at the fence before them, then at each other.

"Can't be cut, you figure?" she whispered.

The man shook his head. "Cyprium reinforced. Take too long. They'd be on us before we were through." He paused. Then, "Can you do it?"

She hesitated, bit her lip, glanced again at the tall barrier. She looked back at him and nodded tightly.

"Pos. Let's do it."

He cupped hands to the sides of her upper arms a moment, encouragingly. Then with a slap to one shoulder he said, "Pos," and turned to face the fence.

He stood waiting while she approached it. Carefully but steadily she put out a hand to the woven metallic mesh. With painful slowness she eased it through a square of the fence without touching the wire. When her forearm was about a third of the way through she bent her wrist, twisting her hand back toward her. Toward the fence.

She grabbed the wire—and grunted at the surge of electricity through her body. Her lips tightened as she ground her teeth together. Her body shook. Her mind grayed. She fought it, reaching down inside, seeking herself, her inner strength, what a follower of the Tao would have called her chi.

She was not a follower of the Tao. She found the Self that controlled all within her, commanded it, wielded it.

Her motor nerves rejected the invading power, refused to be swayed by it. It took so much effort that she could not completely command the auto-ataralgic cells in her spine, could not completely kill the pain. Still she remained in control.

The pain, if it could not be canceled, could be ignored. She held on. Even before she had gained complete control the man had moved.

He ran and leaped for the fence, strong legs propelling him upward, high, a five-meter jump in Andor's .6 gravity. His gloved left hand stabbed out and grabbed wire. He began to climb, bare right hand alternating with gloved left, the latter clinking slightly each time it contacted the reinforced plasteel. He gasped each time his bare hand caught the surge of electricity. He steeled his mind against the pain and switched hands as fast as he could. He knew that although the fence still attacked him, its sensors could send but one warning signal at a time.

Thanks to his partner, that signal originated from inside the compound.

He swung over the top and scrambled down the other side. Halfway down he let go and dropped to the ground. He spared not a moment's glance at the woman, but darted off across the field, booted feet taking great leaps in the low-G. Back and forth among the bushes he cut. Almost he seemed to be seeking something. . . .

He found it. Or rather it found him. A guard grat, its head as high as his neck, came loping over the shrubs toward him. Breathing a reflexive prayer of thanks that it was alone, he spun and reversed direction, racing ahead of the huge animal back toward the fence.

As he came in sight of the woman he spun again, simultaneously reaching for the holstered stopper at his hip. He barely had time to raise and trigger the weapon at the grat, now a mere two lengths distant. The Stunned beast collapsed in its headlong rush, crashing past and grazing the man. Both went down. The animal rolled to within two meters of the fence.

The man, rolling, was up again in an instant. Without bothering His fallen stopper he jumped to the side of the downed grat. He bent and began to wrestle its carcass toward the barrier. In standard gravity the task would have been impossible. Here it was still a mighty feat. But his

adrenaline was up and he knew time was not his ally. He pushed/rolled/dragged the animal close enough to flop one of its limp paws against the fence. The instant it made contact he grunted, "Done! Let go!"

She did. Withdrawing her arm, she sank to her knees, seeking breath. Only a moment. Feeling the same urgency as her partner, she was up and jumping onto the fence. At least as high as he had, higher, and from a standing start. After suffering the full effect of the electricity she felt only a slight tingle as she scrambled over.

She moved swiftly to the man's side. He was just holstering his recovered stopper. For a few secs they looked about in confusion. The sound of an approaching vehicle jerked their heads to one side.

They dashed into the bush and concealed themselves by lying prostrate on grass. They waited.

Soon they saw the single light of an aircycle. It neared, hovered, settled. Two uniformed guards with *JARANIT* blazoned across their tunics stepped into the cycle's light. Each carried a stopper with a spot-torch bonded to its side, casting a beam forward in the direction of the weapon's snout.

The twin beams settled on the hulking form of the grat.

"What the ... ? Oh, Booda's fuckin' butt! Wouldja lookit that?"

"How the vug could that happen?"

"I'll tell ya how the vug—the flainin' circuit's broke down again, that's how. Grat's not sposeta go near that fence. Field should repel him at least ten meters off, if it's workin'! This one ain't, and now we gotta report it, plus the zapped grat. Plus we'll hafta reset the circuits, plus call off everybody the damned alarm alerted. And you know *Taurence* He'll want faxes in ttriplicate. And an investigation first thing tomorrow that they'll of course get us for.

The guard shook her head in disgust.

"Shit," was the only reply of her partner, a wiry little man.

The tall woman sighed. "Come on, let's haul his ass offa there. I'd liketa leave 'im on the flainin' fence. I never liked those monsters anyway. Does my heart good to see one conked. Aah—screw." She moved to the side of the fallen beast, kicked its foot from the fence. She sighed again. "He'll come around. Let's go make with the explains and fix the stinkin' circuits."

Both snapped off the stopper lights and holstered the weapons.

They climbed back onto their cycle, lifted off, and headed north .

The man turned and grinned at the woman in hiding. "We set them sweating in more ways than one."

She smiled back, her dark face untouched by any trace of perspiration. "Let 'em sweat. This climate is so much like home, now that the sun's gone down! Doesn't bother me in the least."

"Those direct daylight rays still bother you?" he asked. To her nod and frown he replied, "You'll get used to it. Come on now!"

They rose from concealment and hurried off into the compound. Northward.

## 2

Angels leap in where fools live in glass houses.

—Wildorado Jee

Business? It's quite simple. It's other people's money.

—*Dumas fils, La question d' argent*

"The whole affair has gone completely downhill in recent years, Taurence. Deplorable."

Warmaug Jaranit accepted a tumbler of iced Rowanberry '39 from his Outie slave woman and settled back on the molded gemwood lounger. Easing the folds of his paisley keemo about his knees, he sighed and rubbed his closed eyes with two fingertips.

His major-domo, Taurence, stood quietly, expecting further comment from his employer. The Outie woman awaited further orders. For a time the only sound in the tastefully rich room was the high-pitched but oddly soothing skirl of a Jarp twinpipe. This emanated from the corner behind and to the left of the owner of the largest food-locust farm in the Tri-System Accord. There a Jarp sat on a broad cushion, legs akimbo .

The bright orange of its body was subdued in the soft globes. It wore only a thin loincloth with strips depending front and back. This disguised its male sexual organ. Had it been visible it would have disguised

in turn the female sexual aperture just below it, and the single testicle below that.

Above the waist the hermaphroditic native of planet Jarpi seemed wholly female. Its bare smallish breasts jiggled with the rhythm of its piping, the red-dyed nipples rising and falling with its breathing.

In its six-fingered hands it lightly held the twinpipe. The cuplike mouthpiece rested against the Jarp's curiously round mouth above its pointed chin. Its eyes, rounder yet, were shut as it concentrated on the music, the notes counter-pointedly rising and falling, and rising and still rising, up to the highs only possible on an openhole instrument when the player possessed not one but two opposable thumbs on each hand, bracketing the fingers.

Topping the player's heart-shaped face was the usual Jarp hair of a red that in daylight would show its true brilliant wine-deep scarlet. In this light it resembled more the dark skin of a cherry.

Among other things, Warmaug Jaranit was a fancier of ethnic music. It was an expensive hobby in these times and this society, when ethnic meant From Another Star System. Warmaug Jaranit could afford it.

He was one of the few Galactics to know Jarpi's art and culture to any depth. He was particularly devoted to the bird-like music of Jarpi. He had studied it extensively—although not nearly as extensively as he believed. He had acquired, by special order from the slaver Shieda, a Jarp musician, a piper/singer. Its name (its Galactic name; its true name was unpronounceable by any but Jarp mouths) was Sitspin, and it was Jaranit's informant on Jarp music.

Occasionally it even told him the truth, and so he did obtain some genuine information.

Unfortunately for Warmaug Jaranit, he knew little of the Jarp sense of humor. Thus the soothing t' leetling and whooting that Sitspin assured its master were Jarp love ballads (a

fascinating concept, that!) were as often as not improvised gross insults. The erudition that Jaranit loved to display among his peers was therefore half truth and half whole cloth.

Sitspin had gone so far as to acknowledge that its owner had achieved education sufficient to be named an honorary Music Master of Jarpi and be granted an honorary jarp name. (Jaranit had hinted that the honor would be welcome and might even result in further preferential treatment for the slave.)

So Sitspin and some of its Jarp friends, slave and free alike, had staged a totally fraudulent ceremony. They bestowed upon the self-satisfied Jaranit a lip-splitting Jarp appellation, which they told him translated roughly as "Seeker of Ancient Melody."

In fact it meant "Woodbuck who Farts while Tripping over Own Testicles."

Jaranit, weary from a long day of supervising the few dozen hectares of his domestic compound and the few hundred thousand of his farm proper, blinked open his eyes. Noticing the Outie woman still standing by, he looked questioningly at Taurence. The major-domo, standing at his master's elbow, bowed thanks and turned to the Outie slave.

"A gin 'n' quinine for me, Petaluma. Iced."

The slave bowed and exited.

Taurence returned his gaze to the plantation master. Jaranit sniffed, sipped, and continued talking.

"The Race used to be something we'd await eagerly for five whole years, Taurence! Not just for itself, you understand. And certainly not for this hyper-carnival the riffraff have attached to the thing. No, it was a chance to see the best in action—to rub elbows with the wealthy, the leaders, the echelons of society everyone aspired to and to which some of us were born, of course."

Taurence nodded as if to repeat, "Of course." He did it without a hint of irony. Having worked his way up from that same riffraff to the management of the wealthiest establishment on Andor, he was good at agreeing without irony. He was good at his job. And loyal.

(Still, he disagreed totally, and quite enjoyed the "hyper- carnival.")

"It was most of all an occasion to see the true sports-People, Taurence! Not just the captains who ran the Race, but the high tossers who bet on it, the connoisseurs who understood the finer points. Now—well, just look at this preliminary list of entries! I mean they may as well let aliens into the Five-Year Race."

Petaluma entered quietly and handed a tumbler to Taurence. He took it, sipping without acknowledging. Being major-domo in such an enterprise had its perks, and one of them was being able to act as if he were a slaveowner himself.

Again Petaluma stood by, waiting. A slight woman though on the chesty side, she wore the impeccable and to her quite drab uniform of Jaranit Ltd. 's household staff. A two-piece of only three colors (aqua, cream, and mauve) that disappointed her by seeming somehow to blend tastefully, it was at least snug at the chest. If she could not indulge the Outie passion for garish colors she could at least be a showoff in one respect. Two.

Indeed, her bosominess was one of the main reasons she had been chosen as household—and sexual—slave to Warmaug Jaranit. Andrans liked large-breasted women. Andor was known for them—a circumstance of forgotten colonial ancestry enhanced by recent genengineering practices. One of Andor's most famous native daughters—one might almost say one of Andor's best-known exports—was the actress and hyperstar of the holomellers: Setsuyo Puma. Her

fans knew her as Akima Mars, secret agent 009. The Biggest Pair in the Universe." At 134 sems / double-E, she probably was.

But Petaluma Peeh, like Taurence, was a survivor and a climber. If she must be a slave, well, a household / Sexualslave was better treated than a field slave. Except when being used.

I've never even heard of some of these entrants.- Jaranit went on. "Complete unknowns! In all sorts of unclassified vessels. In my boyhood, Taurence, the Race was exclusively a testing place for the finest yachts, each crafted expressly for competition. Just listen to some of these names:

*Windrammer, Disc & Bud* (whatever that means), *Star-sucker* great Theba! And the captains! Bassam something-or-other (you can't even pronounce it unless you have some yawp of an accent no doubt), Kalahari Cuw—Theba save us, an Outreacher. What's happening to Andor?"

Petaluma Peeh, Outreacher, again like Taurence An33QF284-V, Andran, was good at concealing irony and other expressions of distaste. Still, she deemed it no risk to look a few daggers at her owner upon his last comment. She knew he would miss the look, as slaveowners did. In this respect she was freer even than Taurence, from whom such a look would have been instantly noted.

"Some of these newcomers, Jaranit-seety, are rumored to be among the best captains along the spaceways," Taurence gently commented. "Indeed, they'll have to be, or be eliminated in the trials."

"Oh bugwash, Taurence." (The major-domo smiled appreciatively at the familiarity implied by his master's deigning to use the slang of the serving class.) "Skill alone is not enough for a sportsperson—if you call it skill, jockeying these ships around. There must also be *breeding*."

Taurence shrugged apologetically as his master went on. "

Here is one entry of which we can approve. *Ruy Diaz*,

captained by Don Arcibo Tostado Bonianueta de Costal – erahas . A pseudonym, of course. Taurence. I can trust you. I'm sure..."

"Of course. seety! My thanks." He bowed in acknowledgement of the honored confidence about to be bestowed.

"He is in reality Manianungo of Jorinne –

"The slaver and pirate, sir?"

"-the *yachtsman*, Taurence. Businessman too. yes. A gentleman of breeding. son of the head of Clan Jacabe. Young but representing an old family. And a fine captain. Took a third in the last Race, his first time out. A beautiful ship, Taurence! Wait'll you see it.-

"May I ask how you obtained the list. sir? So far in advance, I mean."

"Hm? Oh. My brother. You know. Quaspog Jaranit.-

"Ah! The TGW officer."

"Pos. TGO is the Race's prime backer, you know." Again—as slaveowners would —Jaranit took no note that his slave stood within hearing of this classified piece of information.

"No! I did not know," Taurence said, his eyebrows arching. "What is their interest in the Great Racer

"Why, you said it yourself, boy! Why should Trans-Galactic Order, the powerful and secret and feared peacekeeping Gray Organization, be interested in a race that draws together the best spacefaring talent, old and new, in the Galaxy? Precisely because they are the best! TGO wishes to find out, Quas tells me-"

He got no further. An enormous crash interrupted him (followed by the smaller crashes of the two men's tumblers dropped to the floor in shock) and the equally shocked squeal of Sitspin's twinpipe. Silence followed.

Among the the other luxuries his wealth permitted him, Jaranit had tumblers and a huge picture window of real glass rather than the more practical plass. He was now short two

of the former and all of the latter, which lay in shards on his carpet.

Among those glittering fragments stood two fearsome figures in black, stoppers drawn and leveled. The man's face, bearded and scarred, stared tightly but otherwise expressionlessly at the master of Jaranit Farms. Across his chest the intruder wore a chest-dagger, Bleaker-style, and his left hand sported the armored glove favored by spacefarers from that aptly-named planet. Yet certainly the fellow was no Bleaker. With that beard and the four-way stretch black jumpsuit it was difficult to decide just *what* he was.

*Theba! So that's a beard*, Petaluma thought, once the initial shock had passed. *I think I like it!*

The woman's appearance gave no more clues to her origins than the man's. Identically dressed, short, dark as her partner, she could have been from any one of dozens of planets. Her only distinguishing features were exceptionally calfy legs.

"What in the name of—what is this?" Jaranit, who had jumped to his feet, exclaimed.

"Hover easy, rich one," the bearded one said softly, his stopper slowly panning back and forth among Jaranit, Taurence, and Petaluma. "Go slow and no one will be hurt. You!" He jerked the stopper slightly in the direction of the Outie slave. "Over there with the Jarp."

He tossed his head toward the other slave, whom his companion was covering with her weapon. The astonished orange creature sat, pursed mouth open, on its pillow.

Petaluma moved quickly over to stand by Sitspin. Both were astounded when the woman smiled tightly (*something odd about her teeth*, Petaluma thought) and said "Thanks!" in a quiet voice. She neither lowered her stopper nor averted her careful gaze.

Neither did the man's stare waver from the two men under his surveillance.

"What this is, Jaranit-seety," he said with exaggerated politeness "is a robbery. We want cred notes, jewels, whatever valuables you have, that's all. Don't worry, we're not assassins, nor are we fraggy, so it would be a real riser for you if you made a wrong maneuver and we had to send to Musla prematurely, grunt! Bet you're not even on your second lifetime yet. Firm? Lots more wealth to live for than the pittance we'll take! Oh-and we'll require access to your slave quarters.

"Why, may I ask?" the recovering Taurence inquired. Taking charge of his duties, conducting his master's business.

"Neg. You may not ask," the intruder replied. "You may do as I say, or Gri will have a new bootshiner tonight. And what I say is: offcomm. Warmaug will do his own dealing."

"Pos, I will," the planter answered proudly. "And I will tell you that I have no cred here to give you. Why would I? I'm not a Koban street-vendor, fellow. I do all my business by credcard. As any gentleman does."

"Negatory! Cut the cutefob, Jaranit. That's crooked scrute and we know it. We've investigated you a bit, seety. We know you like to do at least small transactions in cash. Showy and impressive. We're impressed! We also know you wear some mighty fine flash when you do your inpersons before the impressionable city folk. So impress us some more! Transfer all that cargo, now."

There was no mistaking the hardening of the disgustingly slangy fellow's face or the tightening of his knuckles on his stopper. Jaranit sighed and turned to Taurence.

"Taurence. Go to the stasafe and get the notes and the jewels. Bring them back here."

"Stay docked!" the woman said. "Blackie, I don't think we should let him go. Send one of the slaves, the server here. I'll go with her."

The man considered, nodded. "Get the jarp over here

behind these two." Then to Jaranit: "Does she have access to the safe?"

"Of course," Jaranit answered, offended. "A gentleman trusts his slaves."

"Ah, pos. Because he treats them right, no doubt. Well, it's probably not the worst mistake you've ever made, but perhaps you'll learn. Zanzibar, take off. And be careful, for Booda's sake."

The woman passed behind the hostages, gesturing the Outie toward the door. As Petaluma moved to obey she caught another short smile from her captor.

*They're all even, the slave thought. Even the canines are no longer than the rest. Zanzibar? An Outie, with teeth like that?*

They exited the room through the privascreen forming the "door." Petaluma led her captor down a hallway. They turned a corner and came upon a niche set into the wall, wherein squatted a statue of the death-goddess Theba. The household shrine.

The Outie took hold of the statue and twisted it. Then she tipped it to one side, revealing an opening in its base. Poking in a finger, she pushed a button. The base rose up to reveal the face of a small stasis safe.

Petaluma placed her palm to its surface. A small chartreuse light winked on, but the vault remained sealed. Leaning toward it, Petaluma said softly but distinctly: "Slice Theba."

The face of the stasafe slid aside, disclosing small latched interior doors.

The dark woman laughed aloud. "Ha! Good! Can Jaranit actually have a sense of humor? Of course no one would ever expect that to be said in front of a shrine! Outstanding.

"Not a sense of humor, I think. Just no prejudices when it comes to getting the job done in the best way possible."

"The slave speaks of the master? Good! You haven't

completely lost your identity for trust. I see. Why say such to me. though? You have no reason for trust."

"You—do seem to be friendly, in a way," Petaluma replied. "If that applies to someone holding one of those things." She skewed her face in distaste. Then she set about emptying the compartments in the safe, one of cash, the other of jewels and suchlike gauds.

"Tell me," she said as her captor extended a surluggan she had withdrawn from a waistpouch and unfolded, "are you really an Outie? What's your full name?"

"You *must* think I'm friendly! Asking a robber for her name! Zanzibar Aye of Outreach, at your service."

"You don't seem like an Outie somehow." *Where have I seen teeth like that before? And those strong legs ...*

"Does it really matter so much who rescues you so long as someone does?"

"Rescue ... ?"

"Come on!" Zanzibar Aye snapped the now-bulging surluggan shut and wagged her stopper at the other woman. They headed down the hall back to the others.

*Rescue?* Petaluma thought. But the time for talk had passed.

As they came through the opaque shield of the privascreen they saw that the tableau had not changed. Without taking his eyes off of his prisoners Blackie spoke to his partner:

"How'd we do, Zanzi?"

"Jes fine, Pilgrim. Looka here." She held out the bag to the bearded man. He took it, still without looking until she had the whole group safely covered. He opened the bag's neck and glanced in.

"BOOPFAITU! Whoever said crime didn't pay?" He snapped the bag shut again. Then he grinned at Jaranit. "You've been a real loosecard tonight, slaveowner. Now just one more round and we'll leave you. Access to the slave quarters."

"No."

The man sighed. "Gonna be a furbaggin' fradgitator, by Tiwan? Well, we didn't come to play khatun, so let's get to it. Zanzi, the slavetube

The woman nodded and reached to another pouch at her waist. She extracted a telescoping tube of a few sems' length and extended it. She made a move toward the farmer.

He retreated a step, hastily.

"Ah. The slave compound. Uh. Well, I would prefer that to pain, naturally. May I ask what you intend?"

"We intend *robbery*, seety," the woman called Zanzi said cheerily as she replaced the pain-producing device. "We intend—"

"Master Jaranit!" A voice from the hallway interrupted her. Immediately thereafter a Jaranit-liveried servant burst through the doorshield, yammering: "The slave compound! Someone's broken in—"

She broke off in turn as she took in the unexpected scene before her. At the same time the man called Blackie involuntarily let his gaze shift to the newcomer for an instant. His partner's never wavered, although her jaw tensed grimly. She expected trouble.

It came. Jaranit may have feared being a helpless victim of the slavetube, but he was no coward when given a chance to act. There was a vast difference in facing danger when one was able to defend oneself. It was the difference between the slave and the master.

Warrmaug Jaranit was eminently able to defend himself. His love of sports and breeding were not solely those of a spectator. In his younger days (and thanks to Galactic technology he was in virtually as good shape now as he had been then) he had been a champion hand-to-hand combat \_artist and an exceptionally fast MercuryBall player.

That speed got him to Blackie before the latter's eyes "could shift back. They went down together onto the broken-

Glass-covered carpet. Blackie's stopper flew from his hand and bounced out of reach.

The commotion – or perhaps it was concern for her partner – broke Zanzi's concentration for a moment. She repeated Blackie's error and glanced aside. She looked back in time to get a frozen glimpse of two things: Taurence charging her, head down; and the other servant falling face down, over the extended foot of Petaluma Peeh

Then Zanzi's vision registered only blurred spots as Taurence hit her midsection. Her breath escaped as from a blown airlock and they too slammed to the floor.

Blackie tried to maintain his concentration against the pain of pieces of broken glass beneath his back. He managed to roll Jaranit over but the latter simply kept the roll going and they ended as before, with the farmer on top. The glass hadn't bothered him as they rolled: his thick robe afforded more protection than the intruder's skin-tight stretch garment.

Blackie's right elbow hit on a sharp edge. Reflexively he released his grip on Jaranit's wrist for an instant and jerked his arm away from the carpet. His hand struck the slaveowner on the side of the head. Seemingly unaffected, Jaranit grabbed with astonishing speed for the chest-dagger melded, point upward, to Blackie's jumpsuit. With a crackle it came away in the plantation master's hand. Backward; the pommel emerging by his thumb, the crossguard against his little finger. The wrong position for knifefighting, but the perfect position for a stabbing blow at a person beneath the wielder. . . .

Jaranit started such a blow, but Blackie's hand rushed, seized the farmer's wrist. Blackie's own left wrist was similarly held by Jaranit while the robber strove to reach his opponent's face with the armored Bleaker glove.

Thus locked, they strained against each other for what to Blackie seemed long minutes. Actually the struggle con-

sumed only seconds. Long enough for the Jarp Sitspin to move around the two groups of wrestling figures to Blackie's fallen stopper. The tall musician bent to retrieve it in one spidery hand. Holding it between thumb and fingers, it adjusted something on the weapon with the other thumb on the same hand.

Then it bent again and rolled the stopper across the floor.

Blackie felt something larger and more solid than the glass press against his shoulder blade. He switched his tactics, hoping.

Yanking sideways with the hand that held Jaranit's knife wrist, Blackie shoved upward with his other arm. Jaranit lurched off balance. Blackie rolled him over. Rather than remain on top of the slaveowner, Blackie released his grip and jumped, a bit unsteadily, to his feet. He glanced downward.

It *was* his stopper. He stabbed a hand out even as Jaranit came to his own feet and lunged, dagger raised. Blackie swung the weapon up, squeezing it as he moved. The sonic beam, invisible in the dim artificial light, leaped forth at Warmaug Jaranit.

He froze for only a flicker of time. Soundlessly his form shimmered. The shimmer particulated, became insubstantial, faded into motes of dust. A Bleaker chest-dagger thumped to the carpet, crunching glass particles. The dust motes settled to the floor oh-so-slowly in the low G.

Blackie stared, amazed, breathing heavily. *I had it set on Stun!*

He had no time to contemplate the "accident." He turned to Zanzi in time to see the small, lithe woman down Jaranit's major-domo with a blow to the side of the head with her stopper barrel—followed by a kick to the backs of his knees. That floored him.

Beyond, the tripped servant was just rising. Behind her loomed the tall orange figure of a Jarp musician with twin

pipes in hand. The instrument went up and came down— onto the cranium of the liveried woman. She collapsed with a smack of face on the floor beyond the carpet.

Zanzi had turned to cover Petaluma, cautiously.

The Jarp looked at the instrument in its hand, its ever-pursed lips drawing in even farther, Sorrowfully. It looked up at Blackie and shrugged.

Blackie's brows furrowed questioningly. He inclined his head and eyes toward the stopper in his hand before looking back at the Jarp. Sitspin nodded, and put one long, loose-jointed finger to its lips in the Galactic sign for silence.

Blackie returned the nod. He swiftly thumbed his stopper from its Three setting: Fry (disintegrate) back down to Two: Stun, then covered the Jarp. The latter's 3-sem-wide spherical eyes remained unreadable.

Blackie saw that the Jarp wore no translahelm, and he knew that Jarp tongues and mouths were incapable of Galactic speech. (Or indeed any speech at all, their language being produced not by a voice box but by their mouths alone and consisting of whistles and tongue trills.) Therefore he made circling signs around his wrist, afterward gesturing toward the groaning semi-conscious retainer. Sitspin acknowledged understanding with another nod and moved toward its own slave stasis chains hanging on the wall nearby.

"Zanzi!" Mackie said, an urgent tone in his voice. "We'll leave that one here. The one you downed and the two slaves are our hostages." He gave her an odd look, as if asking whether she understood.

Puzzled, she began to explain about Petaluma's action in hindering the servant. "But this one tripped—"

"As long as she's not hurt she's coming with us," Blackie shot back, cutting her short. He flashed her what he hoped would be a warning look. *Come on, woman!* Cherm!

The look puzzled her further, but not the feeling she received in response to her emotional probing. *I feel---cau-*

tion. Secretiveness? Perhaps I should not let on that the woman helped. Evidently he wants to go on treating the slaves as potential enemies.

*She acknowledged with a wag of her head.*

*Blackie turned to Taurence, just rising. "Now you, fellow—you saw what happened to your master?"*

*(The servant in fact had not, but a glance about was enough to inform him. He paled.)*

*"Perhaps then you will lead us where we wish to go,"*

*Blackie went on, "without any further trouble?" (Taurence nodded, mouth agape.) "Good. This one was saying something about trouble at the slave compound before my partner unfortunately coshed her. I expect we'd best go even more cautiously than normal, Zanzi."*

*The woman produced a wry expression between frown and smile. "One hopes one will do a better job at that end. One is evidently quite new at this yet."*

*"One is indeed. Two are, in fact. Come on."*

### 3

*To be sure, for insects to grow much bigger than the terrestrial models a restructuring of the insect body would be in order.*

—Gene Bylinsky, *Life in Darwin's Universe*

*Three men and two women in Jaranit livery huddled behind their aircar with drawn weapons. Four held stoppers; the fifth had holstered his and pulled a laser sidearm from the car. Now he edged his head and hand around the rear of the vehicle, cautiously trying to line up his sights on the fence of the slave compound and the barrier beyond. The hastily-erected barrier consisted of a section of wall cut from a slave dwelling, backed by a stack of assorted furnishings.*

*Behind the barricade huddled an unknown number of infiltrators bearing Outwork! stoppers certainly (as witness two Stunned guards on the ground nearby) and evidently something powerful enough to have cut that piece of wall. As the guards were now attempting to cut it with the lacegun.*

*The one with the device, a tiny fellow with beetling brows, got a sighting on the wall without drawing beams. The instant he trigger the lacer, the faintly visible beam of a stopper darted out and struck the ground near him. He drew back his head but kept his hand in place, shooting blind. The curve the car kept the stopper from quite being*

*able to reach him - he hoped. Altogether it took courage to keep his hand—out there. That was why he was guard captain for Jaranit Farms Ltd. That was why he had to take the chance.*

*He was sure he felt his right hand tingle, as he endured every moment expecting the stopper to catch him. He prayed to Tantris that it was still set on Stun.*

*The links of the fence made a succession of spangs as they separated under the coherent light. The face of the wall section started to smoke. He had to look now, to guide the cut. He risked a glance, edging his face out, trying to will his eyeballs to extend from their sockets, so as to show as little of his face as possible.*

*His luck held. He moved the lacegun slowly, inching along the slab of wall. Soon whoever was back there would have to move to avoid being lasered themselves. Then—*

*"Drop the weapons and stand up slowly or your boss goes down!"*

*The voice came from behind him. The other four guards swung their heads and stoppers simultaneously. Their prefect knew they would. He had trained them. (If someone attacks you, or speaks before attacking, stopper first and ask questions later. The speaking probably means your enemy will be likely to hesitate. In any case, and even if the enemy holds a hostage, a stopper on Freeze or Dance would hold everybody immobile and uninjured for as long as necessary. Even Stun would do no permanent damage.)*

*The chance was to shoot before the other person did. It took a cool head. Just as it took one to continue using the lacer, trusting his people to handle the new problem.*

*The new problem was invisible. The only thing the four triggered stoppers hit was a frightened nightthumper out foraging and flushed from the bushes by whomever was out there. The furry little beast danced and jiggled ludicrously in the beam of the stopper that held it on Two: the "Dance"*

*setting of a standard stopper. The intruders were using the modified Outworld kind.*

*"Jugh, there's nothin' there!" one of the women said to her captain. "They're hid!"*

*"Cover the area!" he grunted back over his shoulder. "Don't let 'ern come out. Pin 'ern down."*

*The voice came again. "It's Taurence I've got here! And a knife at his throat." More quietly: "Speak up, Taurence."*

*Taurence's voice sounded, huskily. "Ju-ugh . . ." He cleared his throat. "Prefect Jugh! I am a prisoner. Please put down your weapons."*

*"Prefect. . . ?" the woman asked.*

*Jugh hesitated. Turning, he strained his gaze toward the darkness, but could detect nothing. At last he frowned, untensed, killed the laser beamer.*

*"Bungle!" He laid down the lacegun. "Douse 'em, people," he told his crew in a normal voice. Then he shouted as the others switched off and set down their stoppers, "Right! We're unarmed."*

*Nothing happened for a space. All Jugh could hear was the flopping in the dust of the nightthumper, half-conscious, trying to crawl to cover. Finally failing, conking out entirely to lie unnoticed till dawn. Then it would limp away to its lair, jangled but unhurt.*

*Then the shrubbery rustled and a dark mass rose up from it. The mass resolved into two figures. They came forward followed by others—two or three, it seemed to Jugh.*

*Three. The two in front were Taurence, hands behind his back, and a bearded (!) man who held a Bleaker dagger at the major-domo's throat. The three following were two house slaves, and just behind them, a small woman with a stopper. Wearing a skin-tight four-way stretch jumpsuit, Jugh noticed.*

*Still he kept his mind on his job. Clever, he thought. Couldn't cover Taurence with a stopper unless he stood*

*apart from the guy. And if he stood apart we c' d get ' im. A knife! And . . . the glove? He don't look like a Bleaker. .*

The bearded man removed his armored left hand from his captive's shoulder, switched the knife to it, and drew his stopper. Covering the knot of guards, holding the knife now at Taurence's back, he spoke.

"Ask him what's going on, Taurence."

"Uh. Tell him, Jugh."

The prefect addressed his superior, not the intruder. "Someone's busted into the slave quarters, sir. They bypassed the main compound alarms somehow, but they hit one in the inner. They musta realized it, 'cause as we come up they was throwing up a barricade. We don't know how many. Stoppers. And something that cuts synthetone sheeting.

Quiet again, everyone waiting. Then the bearded man said over his shoulder, "Zanzi?"

The small woman answered, "We're fighting the same enemy. We take a chance, or we stand here and grow old."

Blackie nodded. "Turn on your lights and stand forth," he ordered Jugh. "Hands 'way high, now."

Jugh reached into the aircar—slowly —*Don' t want them to think I'm going for a weapon*—and flipped on the car's lights, illuminating the area around it. Then he led his people out past its end into the light, hands over their heads. Hoping the unknown people behind the barricade had sense enough not to shoot.

*"You can come out!" Blackie shouted. "We have the guards covered and unarmed."*

*A pause. Then in a voice so cold and eerie it could have come from the Dark Universe: "What do you want?"*

*Blackie shivered. His neck prickled. He was far from alone in his reactions.*

*Tao! What was that?* He drew himself together and an-

swered: "Slaves. We want to free slaves, what do you want?"

Another pause. Then the same sepulchral voice replied. but in a matter-of-fact tone. "We want to come out, it would seem."

Almost immediately two figures stepped from behind the barricade, stoppers held in hands pointed down at their sides. A tall man, black of hair and face, blank of eye, in unimpressive baggy black coveralls, and a woman, dressed likewise. The man's face was ghastly. He exuded a tension, a readiness, that Blackie treated as a warning.

The man spoke. "We'll keep our stoppers if you please." It was a statement, not a request.

Blackie replied. "We appear to have a common enemy. Does that make us of common purpose? Or if not, at least not enemies?"

The pair moved closer and Blackie noted another peculiar feature of the man. Around his neck above his low-cut collar he wore a circlet of jewels, but they depended from no wire or other binding. Paint-on jewelry was common enough along the spaceways. These, however, appeared to be set into the man's flesh. Implanted. Mackie shivered again, not so much at this oddity as at the fact that the man's eyes didn't seem to be looking at him, though they were aimed directly at his face.

The grim tones came again. "*If* the truth is being told, then we are not enemies. That can be difficult to sort out. I propose we do so later, since we certainly share a common danger. By now the local policers are surely on their way. Let us dispose of these guards and be about our business."

"Dispose?"

"Incarcerate. The slave punishment pens are right back there

"Agreed. You—Prefect—take your people to the pens."

Jugh unhappily complied. The bearded dark man and the spectral black man herded the guards into the pens while the copper-haired woman and the short woman with the three prisoners from the house eyed each other as warily as their male partners had done.

Standing in the door to the pens, the blank-eyed man turned from the guards-turned-captives to Blackie. He raised his stopper.

"Two?" he said.

Blackie looked puzzled, then grasped his meaning. Both stoppers swung up then and played across the guards, who dropped each in turn to the hard amberstone floor.

Blackie lowered his weapon. His gaze again met that of the tall man.

"How did you know mine was modified?" Blackie asked.

The man shrugged. "I didn't," he said in a normal voice so unexpected that Mackie started. The man smiled. "I thought it not unlikely, somehow."

"Your voice ... ?"

"Electronic implant," the tomb voice replied, exaggeratedly. The normal voice said, "Cybernetically controlled. For effect." He grinned broadly and Blackie relaxed enough to chuckle.

"Effective," he said.

They returned to the others.

The copper-haired woman spoke as the man rejoined the group. "I think quick explanations are in order. If you are indeed feeding us the straight scrute then we're on the same mission. Freeing slaves is our purpose too. But where did you get these hostages, and why? Don't you think stealth would have served you better?" There was no mistaking the suspicion in her voice.

"We, ah—" Blackie began. "Hostages were more direct. We've never broken into a slave pen before. Had no idea how it was protected —"

"We stopped off at the main house to pull a little robbery first," Zanzi interrupted.

The other woman smiled. "Now that has the ring of truth. My name is Lirrine. Who are you?"

"I'm Zanzibar Aye. An Outie," she said with emphasis. "And he's called Blackie. A Bleaker. Blackie 's not his real name, of course."

"Of course." One side of the strange man's mouth rose in amusement. Clearly he didn't believe a word of it. He let it pass. "My name is Darja. I'm an escaped slave. From Aglaya."

Blackie and Zanzi stared blankly.

The man grinned. "The hair, I know. Look." He reached up and gave his forelock a tug. The wig's clinging field broke and he lifted it to reveal short-cropped white hair. He held it a moment, then replaced it.

Blackie and Zanzi exchanged a look of open disbelief.

(No one noticed the look of surprise on the face of Petaluma Peeh. *That's where I've seen teeth and legs like that before! she thought. On Aglayans! He's no Aglayan, but that Zanzi is. . .*)

Lirrine, who had been watching throughout the exchange, said: "Well! Now that we all understand and *trust* each other, shall we get about our mutual business, followed by our mutual survival?"

"To the slaves, then," Darja said, and turned without awaiting agreement.

Blackie and Zanzi followed him. It seemed natural, somehow, that the tall man should lead. As they paced along into the slave quarters Mackie turned to Zanzi questioningly.

To his raised eyebrows she merely shook her head.

*She cherms no menace in these two,* he thought.

Jaranit's farm was a big operation. More slaves poured out of the quarters at their bidding (they were friendly, but the sight of stoppers helped) than Blackie had ever seen in

One place before. Far more than he and Zanzi had expected. Their new companions also seemed taken aback.

They herded the slaves together in a yard between buildings. Darja, again tacitly assuming authority, addressed them.

"Know first that we are criminals. We are well aware of that. We are here to free you —" (a buzz of talk rumbled among the gathered slaves) "—and that is a crime. We have trespassed assaulted, destroyed, broken and entered, robbed" (here he acknowledged his new partners with a toss of his head) "and resisted arrest."

"And killed," Zanzi said quietly.

Darja and Lirrine looked her way sharply, then at each other. Darja went on calmly.

"And killed. Any who associate with us will be subject to all these charges plus the fugitive slave laws. However, we have done this before and not been caught yet. We offer to any slave who wishes it—freedom, with transportation either to your home or to a safe refuge. I—would tell you more but there is no time. Policemen will be here soon. We must hurry."

Not a slave moved, save for a few who shuffled their feet and tried not to look at Darja. It was difficult enough to put trust in strangers who were self-confessed criminals. To trust a man who looked like nothing anyone had ever seen before seemed madness. Too, some of them had heard his other voice earlier. These were work slaves. Their brainboosts were not nearly so complete as those given to house slaves or others assigned to tasks requiring more education. Some of them were from the most backward areas of backward planets. Many were frankly superstitious. All had minimal experience the wildly varying colors and aspects of the Galactic race.

Petaluma was the opposite. Outreach was a highly civilized and urbane planet, and Petaluma's family had been

well-to-do. She'd had the best of brainboosts (excluding spacefaring techniques) and further education before being taken slave.

She knew that Darja's aspect was likely due to cyto - chromatology —a celldye job on his skin and eyes—and the wig she had already seen. The voice, too, was evidently artificial.

Petaluma stepped forward with a careful glance at Zanzi, who nodded. She went up to Darja.

"Pardon me—but none of them will ever ask for freedom with Taurence here. Should he report on them later and they be recaptured it will be much worse for them than would a simple escape. He—"

"You flaming gerbolansk!" Taurence said. The words came out like spittle. "You are a trusted house slave of Jaranit Farms. In a position of responsibility. It's you it'll go hard on. When the Directors hear—"

During all of this Darja had been considering, evidently not listening to the spluttering major-domo. He had not even turned.

Now he did. He turned and stoppered the ranting Taurence. The servant dropped to the ground. He would be out, like the guards, for at least an hour.

Darja turned calmly back to the slaves. "Now. Who will choose to be free? Pos, there is risk. What have you here to balance it? Quickly!"

"I choose to go," Petaluma said.

Darja flashed her a smile. Then he looked at the slaves. In the silence Sitspin stepped quietly up to stand beside Petaluma.

That brought a stir in the crowd. Two Jarps pushed their way out. Each carried a tiny orange-skinned infant, diapered, one perhaps three or four months older than the other. Nervously they joined their fellow orange expatriate.

Others followed, and others. Finally a majority of the slaves had crossed to stand with the raiders. Many still hung back.

"For your protection as well as ours, those who remain will have to be locked up." Dana said.

Three more separated and crossed. No more. Perhaps a dozen stood firm, looking longingly at their recent fellows.

"We could force them," Blackie said.

Without turning, Darja answered: "Freedom begins with the choice to be free. That which is forced is not freedom." Then to the slaves: "You cause me great sadness. I wish you great luck. Come." He began to move them back to their quarters.

While he and Blackie locked the doors Lirrine spoke again to Zanzi. "Whoever we all are, we're going to have to stay teamed up to get a group this large offplanet. Our research was really burok this time. Had no idea there were so many."

"You've done this a lot."

Lirrine flipped her fingers outward in the Galactic belittling gesture. "It's what we do. What Darja has long done."

Blackie came running up to them. "Aircar lights! Far off over the trees there." He pointed.

"Kober Seccers, probably," Lirrine said.

"We'll never get this group off the farm, let alone off-planet," Zanzi said in despair.

"We will if we move," Darja said as he strode up. "I have a—distraction prepared." He spun about and walked off.

The others followed without questions. He led them out of the slave compound, then broke into a trot across the open field. The others arrayed themselves on the fringes of the mass of slaves and kept them moving with words of encouragement and gestures of urgency.

They came to what appeared to be a gigantic wall extending to the limits of vision straight up and to both sides. A wall that shifted constantly within itself as if its components were somehow fluid. Flowing from here to there and in and out. It shimmered and crawled. And it *buzzed*; Chittered stridently

The fugitives were looking at one of the Galaxy's great sources of protein. Overlooked for centuries and now exploited for centuries. Insects, the fodder for the poorer masses of the inhabited Galactic hub. Jaranit farms Ltd. was the main supplier of locusts-as-food to the T-SA and other outlying worlds.

This wall was the outer edge of one of the main locust fields, or "pens" as the farmers called them. An impenetrable mass of the huge (16 to 32 centimeters long) food- locusts, genengineered for oxygen intake and size (without loss of crispy tenderness and high protein content). They were kept within the boundaries of this pen—one of many— by an analectrical field that was anathema to their nervous systems. A block-shaped herd of locusts, covering hectares and reaching as high into the sky as low cloud cover.

Cubic hectares of well-fed and yet ever-hungry locusts, once a dreaded plague and now a prime source for food and snacks.

When this section, this pen was despoiled, the analectrical field would be moved slowly in one direction or another, effectively driving the locusts into a new pen. Then the barren field would be fertilized and replanted with rapid-growth cloned seedlings against the day the locusts—or another herd—would be returned.

The analectrical fields were controlled from scattered blockhouse reached by service tunnels running beneath the locust fields. Darja led their people to one of these houses. The raiders readied stoppers but the place proved to be deserted Either all the guards had been summoned to

search for the raiders or no fields were being monitored in this sector.

Darja ran up to the door and did something that Blacicie could not make out. The door slid open and they entered. The two women crowded into the doorway where they could keep in sight both the slaves and the two raiders inside.

Darja scanned a control panel. "All right now," he muttered. "If Songan was right ... ah! Firm."

He flipped a toggle. Some lights went on in colors startlingly bright for the drab surroundings. Running, his fingers lightly over them Darja selected a pink one and pushed it. A bright red glow appeared. Blackie or any other spacefarer would have recognized it for a WARNING/READY light.

"Now then," Darja said, still with his usual habit of not facing the one addressed. "When I press this button those locusts are going to think they've died and gone to *Behisht*. That field over there" (he pointed out a window) "is fallow. They'll pretty much leave it alone. The *instant* I hit this thing, get running across it. Follow Lirrine. Firm?"

"Firm," Blackie said, and

"Firm," came from Lirrine just outside.

"Good," Darja said. "I have a portable repelling/flowfield to keep the insects away and maintain silence around us so we can hear each other. If it does cover this many people, though, it'll be just barely. We may lose a few if we don't stay bunched up."

"How are you going to do this?" Blackie asked. "Aren't these things coded? Locked?"

"Relatively easy when One's best friend is a genengineered hypergenius," Darja said almost banteringly. "Ugly but beautiful, oh-so-beautiful Songan. Ready flow. ." His finger hovered as Blackie tensed. "Go! Redshift!" He stabbed the button.

Blackie turned and shouted "Redshift!" out the door to

Lirrine. Then he leaped for the aperture. Even so the springing form of Darja nearly bowled him over. The two men rushed out of the blockhouse to find chaos.

The night had lost its shape and its sense. The neat boxlike hugeness of locusts had dissolved into an amorphous, space-devouring cloud. It swarmed in all directions and yet already it began to show some purpose, some heading: the vast majority swerved away from the adjacent fallow field across which fled an insignificant batch of humans.

The insects flew up, sideways, around in circles. The net result of their motion was a flowing away from the field in any and all directions in which lay vegetation. Many went no farther than the next planted field. Over them swarmed the rest, seeking more and more provender. Toward all the unpenned fields on Jaranit Farms's enormous holdings. Toward the fields of adjacent farms. Toward the bordering woodland that stood between the farm country and Koba, capital city of Andor. More all-devouring locusts than the planet had ever seen free were now loose on Andor. At that, it was lucky.

Had all of Jaranit's pens been shut down, Kobadistrict would have been better off with plague and financial collapse—at once. As it was the district would be a full growing season recovering from this night.

## 4

Everything's got a moral if only you can find it

—Lewis Carroll

How many angels can dance through the eye of a needle?

—Wildorado Jee

"Y'think this could be the same outfit pulled that raid on Gem last month, Lootinant?"

Lieutenant Shalma frowned without turning from the controls of his aircar. Of course he thought the slave raiders he and others of Koba Security were after tonight were the same bunch who had raided that mining complex on Gem. What else could he think? Slave raiding was one of the Galaxy's rarer crimes. Two big raids in a row, both in the T-SA, couldn't be coincidence.

A rare crime, but not unheard of. The manual cassettes covered procedure in such cases and Shalma had followed it. He notified the Tri-System Police/TSP and TAI—Terra Alta Imperata. This hardly seemed a TGO/TGW matter, yet. TAI occupied a position below TransGalactic Watch but above all local policers.

In theory. When it came to competence, Shalma and his colleagues shared the opinion of most local policer organizations throughout the Galaxy: that TAI ranked well below them and just above trained guard-grats.

Shalma quietly congratulated himself. TOW would surely have handled the job itself. Or at least made things look as if it had, and garner all the credit. Calling in TAI would make Shalma look dutiful and allay any suspicions of glory-seeking. Of course he had already been well on his way to answer the alarm when he called them, meaning that he would get a crack at the trouble before TAI could arrive. . . .

What a stroke of luck that it had happened tonight, when he was senior officer on duty! Not even a captain in the place. Well, there would be one more captain in Koba after tonight, he promised himself. A major, even!

And then he wouldn't have to ride patrol anymore with this scut, Corporal Sperse.

Shalma reluctantly screwed his bull neck around the minimum necessary to reply to his second. "Pos, Sperse, I think they're the same."

He turned back to his control console and adjusted course slightly (manually, although the car was equipped with a new CAGSVIC\*; it gave him something to do). He watched both the viewscreen and the windscreen as they showed the dark treetops whipping by below the hover-auto. They had nearly reached the boundaries of Jaranit's place.

"You heard that rumor, Lieutenant? About who this raider might be? I mean their boss, their leader?"

Like a little kid playing Policers and Pirates, Shalrna thought with distaste. Still. . . if the rumor (which he'd heard through channels before Sperse had gotten it in the barracks) should prove true—what a loop on his braid that would be! To capture not only big-time slave raiders but the most renowned thief in the Galaxy! Oh, Sperse, don't get so excited you fob on me tonight....

"The others keeping formation, Sperse?"

"Ah, ah, I see—" The skinny corporal wagged his fingers

in the air above his navboard, stabbed a button ("Oh, grabbles!"), canceled that, hit another. "Ah, pos, sir, firm, scan- beepers indicate formation intact, two cars following, remainder on wings."

"Thank you, Sperse," Shalma said with as much constraint as he could muster. *Where do they get these gricks these days? He shoulda had that scrute at his fingertips.* "Pos, I've heard the rumor." (What was that dark area coming up? *Fog? Shit!*) "That would be something, wouldn't it?"

"Sure would, Lieutenant! Imagine us tangling with *him!*"

"Tangling? How about *capturing*, Sperse?" (Better check the sendisp....)

"Capturing? Us? *Him?*" Sperse tasted the idea. "Grabbles! You think we could?"

*Where do they get them?* (Scanbeepers registered—what? *Something. But not solid. Not. . . quite.*) "That's what we're supposed to do, Corporal. It's our job." (*Dust? Rocket exhaust?*)

"Yeah but I mean even TGW's never gotten him."

"He-keeps a low profile, Sperse. Never done anything to rile the big boys. Just every local policer in the Galaxy." (*Flainin' thing's moving toward us! Might have to jump it...* )

"I guess that's why they call him that, huh?"

"Stay docked, Sperse, we're' goin' up." Shalma eased back on the guidelev and the aircar started its climb over the oncoming hazy obstruction. "Call him what? He's called a lotta things." (*Theba that's high! Gonna hafta sideslip and warn off the others. Their AAS' probly do it, but . . .*) Shalma sent out a coded course-change signal and began banking the car to the right

"You know. The one! like."

*Shoulda kept my AAS on. . .* "The one you like?"

"Pos! The Shad—(*It's on the side too!*).—ow War—" "Flainin' scut hold on Sperse!"

Grunt? *Payday*—“

Spurse's strongest expletive was drowned out in the splatter of the aircar's invading the cloud of locusts. The night went entirely black as they covered the windscreens on all sides. The viewscreen blurred because outside sensors were covered with living and dead insect bodies. Shalma pulled back for altitude. (No point in activating CAGSVIC or Automatic Avoidance Systemry now. Nothing they could do that he wasn't already doing.) The car was bumping so that he had no notion whether it responded.

He glanced at his sensor display. All the scanners were jammed now even Altitude. Above the noise of smashing insect bodies the soft *whoosh* of the airjets had turned to a staccato series of great coughing hoots from the clogging intakes.

The dorsal blowers had thus far remained clear, blasting the bugs down, keeping the car aloft even while it lost momentum. Now they were being choked off, being fed the remnants of locusts rather than air. A few pained whirs, a chunk, and the blowers seized. The hover-auto took the top off a rocktree, slowing the vehicle only a little. Then it plowed nosefirst into the soft ground of the forest.

Lieutenant Shalma would make no arrest this mission, although he would have two things to be grateful for: Koba Sec's disability insurance would provide him a decent pension for the rest of his one-armed, one-legged life. Regen would have been more welcome, but only majors and up could afford that.

And neither he nor anyone else would ever have to suffer Corporal Spurse again.

Seven more aircars crashed that night. Two managed to pull up in time and turn back. They were forced into emergency landings before they could reach Koba. Their occupants, unable to leave their cars, had to wait out the passing of the locust swarm

The moral was there, but like most morals it went unnoticed.

At the edge of the wood in which locusts sacrificed themselves to the deaths of machines, the raiders and their slave charges came to a group of parked floaters. Around the vehicles in all directions, extending even into the wooded area, lay a space that remained free of the insects.

These were Dada's and Lirrine's transport. They had been equipped with Hojatocorp of Terasaki's best Duasonic insect repellors in anticipation of this method of covering their escape.

The fugitives had to pass through a small section of the swarm that lay between the fallow field and the forest. The portable repellor formed a bubble-like field around the running throng that moved with them. It also silenced the hideous din produced by the countless locusts. A few of the slaves had straggled and slipped outside the protective field. The experience had unnerved them to the point of hysteria. Just trying to breathe among the locusts was. . . harrowing. At least they were too large to be inhaled. They could not be kept from brushing against and even landing on every part of a person. Those slaves who wore garments of natural fabric were practically denuded as the voracious insects devoured the cloth.

Blackie and Zanzi and Petaluma attempted to calm the slaves while Darja and Lirrine ran to the aircars and conferred with their pilots. After much gesticulating and some head-shaking they returned to their new partners.

"These ears will take most of the people," Darja said. "There just won't be room for all. How many floaters do you have? And where?"

Blackie looked nonplussed. "Just one, directly the opposite side of the compound. We had no idea there'd be so

many. Where'd you get all these autos? Will your gravboat take this many people?"

"Pos. The cars we rented. The pilots are our crew—all ex-slaves.

Zanzi let out a low whistle. The look that passed between her and Blackie said that they'd gotten attached to something bigger than they had realized

"Shall we get 'em on?" Lirrine urged. "The families first, especially with children."

"Firm." Blackie said. "And preference for those who are most fraggled. They'll balk at the trip back across the fields to our car."

Darja nodded. "Firm." He faced the throng. "These cars will get you to our lander and thence offplanet. You won't all fit, but we have another car across the field on the other side of the compound. Those of you who feel best able to make that dash with us please stand aside and let others into these cars."

Some of the calmer slaves, mostly single men and women, a few couples, one Jarp, stood aside. All those with children stayed with the main group. Lirrine, Zanzi, and Mackie began to help the shakier ones to the floaters. Darja kept watch at the fringes of the field. Quietly Sitspin joined him. The raider smiled at the Jarp. It had exceptional night vision, he knew.

Lirrine came running over to them. "All loaded and zipped. About a dozen left over."

"Firm. Get them off."

Lirrine turned, shouted. "Ignite 'em! Redshift!"

The pilot of one floater waved an arm and popped into her cabin. With a whirl and whoosh of air, the hover-auto lifted, kicking dust in a wide circle. The others followed. They banked away over the forest, giving the appearance of bubbles floating in the swarm of locusts, the repellors

pushing the insects aside before the cars.

As the last one hovered before pulling out, Darja herded everyone back out to the barren field. Behind them the insects poured into the small green area left by the departure of the aircars and their analectrics. The locusts left behind them, in turn, a forest gone skeletal.

Double-timing across the dusty field, Zanzi asked Lirrine, "You didn't go with your own vessels?"

"Obviously," the coppery-haired woman panted back. Then, "Sorry. The slaves come first. We're here for them."

Zanzi nodded, understanding.

They came again to the hole in the fence that they had lasered on the way out with Jugh's cutter. The fallow field extended the width of the farm and they had no trouble with the bugs on their way. Many of the slaves, however, were winded long before they reached the opposite side. Two rest periods made all four raiders visibly anxious.

*Khazed!* Blackie thought. *If it weren't for the low G some of these people wouldn't make it at all.*

They did, in time, and cut through the opposite fence. There they stopped short. A rounded lump lay at the edge of the wood some meters away, covered with moving insect forms. The aircar.

"Bungle!" Lirrine gasped. "How the vug are we gonna get to that thing?"

"Even if we could, how could anyone get in?" Zanzi asked. Barely breathing hard, she seemed the freshest of the group.

"I assume you have someone onboard?" Darja asked. "Someone resourceful?"

"Pos," Blackie answered. "Man named Anders. Able Spacefarer and a good friend."

"Then he'd have sense enough to up his aircon if the vehicle's skin began to overheat? He'd not panic?"

"Neg, but—oh! I see. That aircon's small, though.

Couldn't handle enough heat to burn 'em all off."

"We need only clear enough for him to see us. Then he can lift over here."

"All right then," Blackie said. "Let's do it! Zanzi, Luneer—"

"That's Lirrine."

"Sorry. Stoppers on Three. Beam at the windscreen."

"Neg," Darja said. "The plass won't conduct heat as the aluminic will. Take forever. Aim at the eyesystemry."

"What would we do without you?" Blackie said, with a crooked smile that let Darja know the sarcasm masked genuine appreciation.

All four raiders unholstered their stoppers and dialed them to Three. This activated the inner of the two cylinders, the deadly one, the killing one. While its effect on living tissue was to disintegrate, it was nearly harmless to inanimate matter. Nearly. If left on long enough, it imparted heat to substances capable of conducting it. *Lots* of heat.

Four beams converged in the area of the aircar's view sensors. The locusts in that immediate convergence vanished into dust instantly. More kept swarming into the beams, to be Poofed in turn. Thus the sensors were mostly clear of obstruction—although now the beams fobbed them.

Soon, though, the aluminic skin of the vehicle began to heat up around the sensors. One by one, then all in a rush, clocusts flew off or scuttled away. At last the area stood clear.

"All right now, just to one side of the eyes," Blackie said, and shifted his aim. "Come on, Anders, blueshift!"

"Lirrine, Zanzi," Darja snapped. "The intakes!"

The women shifted their beams to the airscoops, frying the insects that would otherwise have been sucked into the blowers when the vehicle started. For a moment nothing changed. The cleared area grew larger as the heat spread.

Then they heard the low whine of starting blowers.  
The

car lifted—amid the locusts spun out from beneath by the fans. A half meter up, the floater wafted across the sward to settle at the feet of the rapidly-backstepping raiders.

Quickly they cleared its surface of insects, most of which were already rushing to escape the analectric repellors.

The side door of the floater lifed and a small, jumpsuited man ducked out. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and faced Blackie and Zanzi, who had run around to meet him.

"Payday, jacko, I thought you were gonna cook me sure!"

"Didn't you up the aircon?" Blackie asked.

"Up it? I logged it off! I thought it was fobbied and overheating. Then the viewer started imitating a spectrum lamp. I thought I had demons as well as bugs. When I saw what you were doing I just got over here quick—screw the aircon. Thanks. Holy Musla, what's that?"

"That's our new ... partner. Darja, this is Anders. Over there is Lirrine—his partner."

Darja nodded. When he turned to Blackie those blank gray eyes seemed almost to smile.

"A Muslim named Anders, eh? Convert?"

"You're tall for an Aglayan," Blackie said, shrugging. "Convert? Come on. We gotta load this thing." He waved an arm at Lirrine, who began to bring the remaining rescues over to the car.

"Tao, I mean Musla, Blackie," Anders said. "A dozen people in this cab?"

"So get cozy. There's a couple of pretty cakes, though none with green skin—sorry."

"Thanks. Why is it you keep getting involved with people with funny skin and fisheyes?"

"Don't insult the man," Blackie mock-warned his friend. "He's got a voice that could aircon half of Sekhar. He'll do a deep-space number on your blood."

"I just heard his voice," Anders said. "Sounded fine to"

"He meant this one," Darja said in a tone that carried the cold of the void.

"Holy Prophet !" Anders shivered. "Oh, jacko, what are we shipped with this time?"

"Never mind," Blackie said. He tried to grin at his friend's reaction. The truth was that the voice still unsettled him, despite the fact that he now knew the man behind it. Sort of. "Get these people out of here fast. Take a spiral climb out over this field until you get above the locusts. Then beeline for the gravboat—neg, wipe that. Skirt Koba and come in from the other side.

"What are you Talkin'?" You're not comin'? Oh." Anders glanced at the aircar, stuffed to the windscreens with warm bodies. "But how're you gonna ... ?"

"Don't know yet," Blackie said. "You just get these people offplanet and safely onboard *Ra*—ah, *Freerain* before the authorities sort out this bug cess and put a Detain on all gravboats. Redshift! We'll see you when we can."

"You *will* see me, jacko. Understand? Get your asses *outa* here!" Anders waved an admonitory finger under his friend's nose.

Blackie smiled fondly. "We will. Tense not, Pilgrim."

Anders looked uncomfortable, as if he wanted to say or do more. He hesitated, turned and paced purposefully to his floater. He squeezed in amid much grunting and shuffling and zipped the hatch behind him. Sharing the pilot's chair with a young woman and hemmed by a Jarp on the other side, he started the blowers again, hit the power bar and lifted off. The four raiders watched the floater circle up until it was only a black interruption against the starlight. It veered off in the direction of Koba.

Blackie looked down. "Mission accomplished," he said. "Saved all the slaves. All we forgot was to get away.

" Not quite all the slaves," a voice said from behind him.

He turned in surprise to see Petaluma Peeh. Sitspin stood at her side.

"There wasn't room," Zanzi said. "They volunteered."

Dada nodded. "A good thing, too, since they doubtless know this area better than you do. If you're going to make your own escape you'll need some good advice."

"Our escape?" Zanzi blinked. "What about you?"

"We have ... a way. I wish that we could stay and help. Our first duty is to our own ship and crew and passengers. I know you understand that. And I know you'll make it. You're as capable as I've seen, and that includes your new Outie and Jarp friends.",

Blackie nodded. He was a spacefarer. He understood duty.

"Contact us," Lirrine said. "We can help you in your work, which is clearly the same as ours. We can help those you rescue."

"Easily said," Blackie replied. "Finding you is another matter. You haven't even told us the name of your ship."

"Our ship is—" Darja began. He stood for a moment, his jaw hanging open. Then, looking surprised, he said to Lirrine:

"What the vug are we calling it this trip?"

She looked amazed while Zanzi hooted with laughter. Blackie smiled, uttered a great "Ha!" Darja snorted and shook his head. Finally even Lirrine collapsed in release of tension as much as mirth. At last wiping a tear from her eye, she said:

"Look. The name of our ship doesn't matter. It's not our base. You need our names and one other, and a code. I'm Lizina Harith\* and he's Dorjan,\* once of Harb. That means nothing although you'd know one or other of his nick names. The name to remember, though, is Yemahl Huhl-

\* For their story, see Spaceways #5, Master of Misfit, and #7, The Manhuntress

eem. Of Panish. My lawyer. Contact him. Tell him who you are and what happened here. By then he'll have the story from us."

"Will he believe we are who we say?" Zanzi asked.  
"We, uh . don't really look like this, you know."

Lirrine/Lizina grinned. "Firm, we knew that. You're not the only ones. No, don't think you did a fobby disguise job. Dorjan can see through anything. He's ... experienced at it. Anyway, Yemahl will know you when you give him this code: H-O-M-E-two-four-one-seven-double-X. That'll get you a full explanation."

"Wait a sec!" Blackie said. "Lizina Harith! Of the Panishi Hariths? The one who disappeared and then was found and then—"

"Disappeared again. Firm," Lizina said. "I'm found again, as you can see. No more talk now. None of us has time. Dorjan?"

They turned to the Harbian but his face was invisible, with his tunic pulled up around his head. As he bent to slide it off his raised arms, Blackie and Zanzi saw a sort of protrusion, like a hump on his back.

He doffed the tunic, straightened, and with a crackling and beating extended his plasteel wings.

"Tao!" Blackie gasped. Zanzi merely gaped, speechless.

Lizina went to Dorjan. He scooped her up in his arms and her hands grasped his shoulders, carefully avoiding the ring o jewels around his throat. He worked his wings, crouched to spring

Blackie held up a hand. "Wait! You said we'd know you by one of your nicknames. . . ?"

The blank-eyed man sprang into the air. He rose and twisted about to face them, hovering.

"The Shadow Walker," he said. "The Demon Cat. There are others. As with my face, my voice, my reputation, they're not real. Nor are these jewels, which are TPs re-

placing blind eyes. And now, Cool Winds to thee, Blackie and Zanzi ... of Aglaya!"

He turned in air and flew off over the field, stretching for height. Lizina's voice drifted back to the two dumbstruck raiders:

"Yemahl Huhleem! Remember the code!"

Zanzi found her voice. "I have it! Cool Winds—to thee...."

They were gone.

Zanzi looked at her partner. "Blackie?—those names? Do they mean anything to you?"

"Oh, pos," he said, though he looked as if he couldn't believe it. "Firm, they do. We've been working with the most renowned thief in the Galaxy. And the most wanted."

"Right now," Petaluma said, "he's no more wanted than the rest of us, at least here on Andor. I suggest we get going."

"Agreed," Blackie said. "Where? We're in your hands. Is there any way out of here except . . . ?" He gestured broadly toward the woods.

She nodded. "Firm. This whole place is serviced by tunnels. Not just for access. All the main controls and conduits are underground. The Jaranit tunnels connect for transport purposes with the underground systems of Koba."

"You mean we can just walk to the capital?" Zanzi asked, eyebrows rising.

"Not that simple," the Outie said. "There'll be guards . . . especially after all this!"

Blackie looked as if he had bitten into a green bapple.

"And you can bet they'll have the tunnel to Koba blocked," he said. "So that's that."

Petaluma shook her head. "Neg. Not that simple for them either. There isn't just one tunnel, but a whole maze running under adjacent farms. Many routes into town. It's a ways, but that gives us lots a opportunity for evasion."

The raiders exchanged questioning looks, nods. Blackie again unholstered his stopper.

"Let's redshift," he said.

Neither Blackie nor Zanzi had any need of stoppers. Oh they came close, once or twice. Hiding behind a huge cybertractor, they managed to avoid detection by a Jaranit patrol. Then they made it into the tunnels.

Blackie thought he had a good sense of direction, forged on his starless home planet where woodsmanship demanded it, tempered on nigh-featureless Bleak, and honed by years of astrogation. Yet he couldn't for his life have renegotiated the labyrinth through which Petaluma led them. She commented at one point that it was just logic, grasping the purpose of each tunnel and thus comprehending the nearness and direction to the city. . . .

Whatever the explanation, it worked. They dodged two more patrols (Koba Seccers this time), stopped to rest once, finally emerged from a service hatch into a blue dawn in a cheap section of Koba. The streets were bare—of people and of decorative shrubbery. The locusts had come and gone. Plants were pitiful skeletons with stripped stems like bones.

Free of the tunnels, free of Security, free of the necessity to maintain their disguises, they were by no means free of Andor. The disguises were in fact a liability, since descriptions were surely out on all four of them. Those of the Outie and Jarp were accurate, of course.

"We could put makeup on you, Petaluma," Zanzi said. "But there's no way that would do a thing for Sitspin. And we can't celldye you, anyway."

The Outie looked her redeemer in the eyes.

"You could leave without us. You've many slaves off-planet already."

Zanzi smiled. "We don't do this by numbers, Petaluma.

If we did we'd go mad or give up. Individual slaves are, why we came here. It's why we'll stay until we can all go."

"Besides," Blackie added, "we've become rather fond of you. Especially since you've saved our lives more than once. We're grateful. To you, too, Sitspin, for bashing that guard on the konk."

The Jarp whistled quietly. Minus its translahelm it couldnot communicate in Erts, the language of Galactics. It understood that language, though, and its friend and fellow slave understood Jarpi. Petaluma translated.

"Sitspin wants freedom no less than I do. Naturally we wanted to help. Naturally we also tried to cover that help\_ in case you lost." She shrugged. "Maybe you're used to Outie and Jarp spacefarers and/or freed slaves. We have been neither. Sitspin is a musician—and a gentle soul. I was a farmer on Outreach. We've seen only two worlds each: our own and Jaranit Farms. Plus of course the slaver ship between. I was taken on my first and only voyage, a business trip. Sitspin was snatched right off Jarpi. We aren't fighters. And there's more to it than that."

The Jarp reached out bony fingers to touch Petaluma on the shoulder, uttering meanwhile a series of mildly frantic trills, one of which, repeated, sounded like "Hoo-ee."

Petaluma smiled comfortingly, shook her head. "That's as close as it can come to my name," she said. "Loomie, for Petaluma"

"Beats Pet," Zanzi said. "Loomie you are."

"Anyway," the Outie went on, "Sitspin doesn't want me to tell you its story. It's all right, you know," she said to the Jarp as it again made the "Hoo-ee" sound. "We can trust them."

"Speaking of trusting," Blackie said, looking about anxiously, "where are you leading us?" Petaluma/Loomie had been Preceding them down a shadowed side street while they glanced nervously in all directions.

"Don't worry," she said. "You don't see Security people in this neighborhood. Sitspin has friends near here who will shelter us. Pos, even with the risk. They're like that. Not all natives of slave planets condone the practice, you know."

"You mean you even knew what sector of the city we were under?" Blackie asked. "Loomie, you could replace SIPACUM's nay cassettes!"

"Grunt?" she said, puzzled.

"Never mind. Let's get under cover instead of talking. Once we're out of this ultralatex and the celldye wears off—"

"And you shave," Zanzi said.

"—then maybe we'll be able to contact our ship. Although chances are, they've slapped a Detain order on every ship in port.

Loomie of Outreach, recently slave to the deceased Warmaug Jaranit, led her rescuers and her fellow slave away.

Overhead a tramp freighter going under the name Free-rain waited in vain for contact. It had received its gravboatload of slaves just before the Detain had been clapped on. No search had been instituted—yet—but incoming messages originating planetside were being monitored.

Freerain's captain tried to maintain the Tao. Yet lately he had doubted the Way, and it failed him now. He was worried. He had done many difficult things in his career. Breaking a Detain was not one of them. Abandoning his crew was another.

But if that crew did not come soon, very soon....

## 5

Let schoolmasters puzzle their brain  
With Grammar, and nonsense, and learning.  
Good liquor, I stoutly maintain,  
Gives genius a better discerning.

—Oliver Goldsmith

That packet of assorted miseries which we call a ship.

—Rudyard Kipling

"Stillwell, m'boy, you've outdone yourself this batch. I haven't had such stuff since my first life."

The Outreacher named Trafalgar Cuw hoisted his replenished plass to the tank containing the amorphous creature called Stillwell. (Actually there were more than one. No matter. Trafalgar called them all Stillwell.) Carried off the planet Knor during a hectic escape from slavery, the liquor-producing beings were alike the pride of Trafalgar's eye, his daily pleasure, and a future investment.

Not that Trafalgar Cuw needed money. He and the rest of Satana Coalition had carried more than these living stills away from captivity. They had stolen from their erstwhile masters lots of the Knormen's favorite but useless—on Knor—product. The jewels that the isolated Knorese made as a hobby were the most beautiful and rare in the Galaxy.

Trafalgar Cuw was rich. Rich enough to be independent.

Yet he was loyal to his friends of the Coalition. Despite their early suspicions, despite his supposedly false TGO ID that TGO's own membanks confirmed, he had always helped them, always shared their danger. Maybe he really was a subdeep-cover agent for TMSMining Co. Who cared? Trafalgar was Trafalgar—friend.

Now he shared their search for their missing member and friend, Janja of Aglaya.

Trafalgar hitched up tight royal blue pants and adjusted the enormous belt buckle studded with Knorese gems. Above the belt he wore a loose open tunic of claret red. Holding the plass, he stepped from his cabin in calf-high snakeskin boots with square toes and platinum counter-foxing. He headed for the crew's mess.

There he found the two Jarp members of the crew just finishing a meal preparatory' to relieving their captain oncon.

"How near to the T-SA, people?" he asked.

Cinnabar, the Coalition's Jarp member, looked up at him. "You'd have to ask the captain that one, Trafalgar. I can't keep track anymore, the way she pilots. Closer than we should be at this speed, certainly."

Trafalgar grinned. *Closer than any other captain could be by now, if I know Quindy!* He stepped to the room's commbox and keyed on. "Captain Quindarissa, m'love," he said. "How near to T-SA?"

A moment's silence. Then the box answered in the quiet voice of their captain:

*"Near enough."*

Trafalgar waited. No more came.

"That far, huh?" he said blandly, and sipped his drink. *(Oh, Stillwell!)*

The box spoke again. *"A day, say. Normally. I'm trying something new that might cut some of that off."*

Cinnabar moaned. "Experimenting with our stomachs again?"

"Right," Quindy said. "*No kiddy guts allowed on Sunmother!*"

"Oh, Cinnabar!" Trafalgar shook his head. "You think it's been bad so far—wait'll you see what she does in the Great Five-year Race! No cassettes, remember. All shiphandling by the seat of her pants!"

"That's a seat I'd be happy to handle," Cinnabar said. "Ah Trafalgar, you lucky jarpoid you!"

Trafalgar's eyebrows reached for his hairline. "Jarpoid?"

Cinnabar nodded. "Sweetface and I," it said, indicating the other Jarp, the non-Coalition crewmember, "have decided it's pure bigotry that anything with two legs and two arms gets called 'humanoid'. From now on any race that resembles Jarps—obviously the premiere race in the universe—will be known as jarpoid."

The two natives of Jarpi grinned at each other. Jarpoid grins; more like flattened pursed lips to humans; Galactics.

"Lord, lord," Trafalgar said. "Next I suppose we'll all have to get tweety-bird implants or have our mouths gengenical—uh, geningenic—blast! Uh—pursed, genetically engineered-ly," he pronounced carefully, with an accusing look at his drink. "Or maybe we'll all just wear transom- helps. Stop laughing! Translahelms!"

He slapped Sweetface's translation helmet /translahelm, a difficult task since by now the Jarp was nearly doubled over.

Cinnabar too had gone from orange- to crimson-faced and was tooting for breath. Unlike its fellow, Cinnabar neJarpi (a title it had gained on Jorinne and thought befitted its dignity as one of the richest Jarps in the Galaxy) wore no helmet to translate its speech into Erts. With its newfound wealth it had purchased the surgical implant that accomplished the same purpose "naturally."

Now it wiped tears from its great round eyes and managed to choke out a few words:

"It's really not fair—we should hafta we—wear the darn' things. Why not you? Here, Sweetface, let 'im borrow yours." The thought of the dandified Outie in a translahelm sent them back into Jarpish giggling.

"Careful," Trafalgar said. "I may wind up as a famous entertainer—able to whistle a few bars of *anything!*"

They were interrupted by the sound of a warning ding and the flashing of a red light on the commbox. Once that had signaled conversion to or from tachyons in one minute. No longer. On spacer *Sunmother* it now meant "Conversion at any moment—strap your ass down!"

Right: the Jarps barely had time to stifle their jollity and Trafalgar to pounce into a seat. They felt their guts distorted as the ship dropped below lightspeed back into "normal" space (a euphemism that had nothing to do with any difference in space but rather in those who plied it).

For a few seconds Trafalgar Cuw wished he had never heard of Stillwell. Or alcohol. Or Quindy.

The feeling passed. He was happy to find that he had held onto the contents of his stomach, though he felt little inclination to add to them. He put the plass aside.

Quindy's voice, more relaxed and confident, came through the comm. "Is everybody happy back there? Sweetface, you're due oncon in five."

"Haven't forgotten," Sweetface answered. "One thing Jonuta insisted on was promptness."

"The great Captain Cautious," Trafalgar said. "Somehow I doubt that he'll be a contestant in the Great Race!"

Sweetface flipped six fingers. "Jonuta'd never enter a race. His ego runs in other directions. Besides, he's wanted in T-SA. Lucky for us."

"Quindy's already outmaneuvered him once, remember," Trafalgar said. "That's how Janja got to Poof him over Aglaya. Of course the fellow didn't have the decency to stay dead. Come on, we'll walk you to the con."

The Jarps and the Outie rose. Trafalgar watched Cinnabar stretch. It wore what had come to be the Coalition uniform: a tight crimson jumpsuit with wide-bottomed legs, black sash, and biased sleeve cuffs that came to a sweeping point behind. Trafalgar couldn't decide whether Cinnabar's triple bulges—two of chest and one of crotch—looked ludicrous or enticing.

Sweetface wore the more normal Jarp attire of strap-titser and snug shorts. The clothing even more emphasized its dual sex.

As the three entered the con-cabin, *Sunmother's* captain turned in the master's chair to face them. Definitely not in the Coalition "uniform." The bando that precariously contained her breasts was a crimson that contrasted with the dyed-by-her-own-hand true black of her skin and bright yellow of her hair. Her crimson pants were very snug to the knees, and very wide below.

She looked satisfied. When Trafalgar peeled his gaze off her to glance at the Big Screen, he saw that she was entitled. The three suns of the Tri-System Accord flared just ahead. The star named Arkimedes was nearer than it had any right to be.

"Ah so," Trafalgar said, smiling broadly. "I do believe we are riding with a winner!"

"Hate to go through that for a loser," Cinnabar said, pressing a hand tightly to its stomach.

"My bet is on you, Captain," Sweetface said. "Cinnabar and I have negotiated a loan, for me to place a substantial bet."

"I'd hate for you to lose," Quindy told it, "but—how could I not be confident? Traf—you really think the Race might attract Janja?"

"It attracts nearly everyone, Quindy. Huge numbers of people—more than you've ever seen. Never been to one?"

She shook her head. "Five years ago I never thought I'd

be an independent pilot, much less ship's master. Anyway I never thought I'd be competent enough to enter. And. I just wasn't that interested, really."

"Well, you're more than competent now, Captain-san! A natural, Quindy." *Like Janja—a natural. An Aglayan 'primitive' snatched and sold, who freed herself and owns this ship. Give that woman another five years and she may run the Galaxy—or own it! Sure, the race might attract Janjaglaya Wye!*"

"This natural needs a rest," Quindy said. "Gotta stay fresh for the Race."

"Firm," Sweetface said, dropping into the mate's chair before the console. "If I collect on my bets I'll be one wealthy Jarp. I suppose you richies could *use* the prize, hmm?"

"Once we might have murdered for a CAGSVIC," Cinnabar said, exaggerating. "How Janja got this one when the policers have first call on 'em I can't imagine, but who else had it delivered to us onstation?"

"Yes, uh, it's nice," Quindy said casually, rising and stretching. "Oh—sorry. That wasn't deliberate."

"You stretched accidentally?" Trafalgar grinned. "Hey— you don't sound so thrilled to have a vocally interactive computer that even stells can't buy, Quindy —or shouldn't be able to buy, anyhow."

Sweetface was looking wise. "The VIC is great for the rest of us. I'd say the captain won't even use it, in the Race. It would just slow her down."

All three of the others looked their question at the Jarp.

"I've been watching you, Captain, and worked closely with you, back when we were tracking Jonuta for Janja. What makes this captain so good is her reaction time, Trafalgar. She actually *anticipates* SIPACUM. Knows what it's going to say. As if you're reading its mind, uh, membanks, Cap'm. You slap out orders before you have all its

information. And—you never guess wrong, Captain."

"I, uh, never guess" Quindy said, almost shyly. ,

"Grabbles!" Cinnabar said. "The way you slam us into conversion—if I thought you were guessing I'd find another ship!"

"But Quindy's reaction should be even better to vocal data," Trafalgar began, and Sweetface cut in:

"Negatory! It's not just reading SIPACUM, it's *controlling*. She can react with her hands faster than she can get out command words—I've seen it! Our captain can enter instructions before CAGSVIC's ready to receive them, or at least before she or anyone else could put those commands into words. She can punch keys faster than sentences can be spoken."

Quindy was meanwhile grateful that no blush could show through her jet skindye.

"Look, uh, quit talking *about* me, all right? All that may well be—I just do what I do. It's nice to have CAGSVIC on *Sunmother*, everything up to state-of-the-art. Meanwhile—I want to win the Race because it would *feel* good. If we do and suddenly have two VIC units—I'll bet we can think of something to do with the 'spare'!"

"A woman after my own heart," Trafalgar said. "A sensualist. Win because it feels good—yes! Now as regards your needing rest *and* your sensualism," he said, taking her hand in that *tres gallant* way he sometimes affected, "how about joining me for a couple of rounds from my blood-brother Stillwell? Believe me, it *will* feel good!"

Quindy turned a little frown on him even while her eyes held amusement.

As they moved to the cabin door Trafalgar threw back, "We leave the ship in the digit-rich hands of you two capable Japes. Do a good job and I'll let you both have a piece of the action when we hit T-SA."

"Say . . . "

He ignored their looks, shifting from him to Quindy. "My enterprise aborning, I mean, soon to be T-SA's hottest new concern: CuwStig Liquors!" And he swung out the hatchway.

"Cuw, are you drunk?" his captain asked, as the cabin door slid shut behind them.

"Just having a little fun with my friends," he assured her. "Oh, I may have a bit of a nascent buzz. I came to get you to see if you wouldn't like to share it and—"

"—and some other things, I know. Glad you waited till we were out of the cabin. Wouldn't want you overstimulating the crew."

"This crew was born overstimulated." "Speak for yourself, Outreacher."

"I do," he said, reaching out.

"Um," she said, hunching her shoulders and writhing. "Not a care about overstimulating *me*, hmm?"

"I certainly do. It's one of my constant concerns. Can you feel anything when I do this?" "Hunnh! Pos, oh, pos—stop ..."

"*Stop?*" he said, lowering his voice and adding a challenging strength.

"Uh—just until we're behind another closed door . . ." Her voice had gone soft and she turned an equally soft, suddenly vulnerable face to him.

It was a little surprise each time he saw it, this nearly visible transition from ship's captain to more-than-submissive lover. It was part of her makeup, the necessity of her sexuality, and part of their relationship. Behind closed doors she enjoyed, *needed* the slavish role and mastery. Unless the door was to the con-cabin and she was oncon, of course.

Right now that was in other hands. Six-fingered ones.

Sweetface said, "Cuw-Stig?!"

"The Stillwells are stigluls, don't forget," Cinnabar re-

minded. "That's the Knormen pigs' word for the garbage-in-booz-out beasties."

"Oh." Then, "Ah. Going to turn 'em into a business. Of course! He might even contract with some town to become its municipal garbage disposal company

Cinnabar nodded, regarding its fellow hermaphrodite. After a time it spoke, quietly:

"Quite jarpoid behavior between those two, wouldn't you say?"

"Drinking together during the ship's 'day' hours?

"That's not what they've gone off to do and you know it. What about you, Sweetface? You going to go on being the only celibate Jarp along the spaceways? *Very unjarpoid ... shameful!*"

Sweetface sighed, a sound more like a human's whistling through its teeth.

"I... have hopes that ... Whistle might be on Andor for the Race. Many nobles come and bring their slaves ..."

Cinnabar touched its arm. "That's a vague hope, isn't it? Excuse me—but it isn't what I'd expect from the realist you are. Oh, believe me I respect the hope, and share it! Just not the enforced abstinence. What good does it do you or Whistle?"

Sweetface granted its crewmate a wan smile. "I suppose you're right. Still ..."

"You were laughing fit to void awhile ago and it didn't hurt you or anyone else, did it? 'Tis as healthy to screw as to laugh,' as the Galactics say."

"They do? Where'd they get that? Trafalgar's cousin?"

"Neg," Cinnabar said. "Some Jarp. Me, actually, just now. Look, I don't know exactly what our crewmates are planning on doing but I know something we can do that they can't. It's spelled one-three-eight. What say?"

"Here in the con-cabin?" Sweetface's brow wrinkled in surprise. Yet Cinnabar saw the softness in its eyes.

"Well, that might be amusing," Cinnabar said. "I wonder if SIPACUM's a voyeur. However, we are on duty, or you are. Remember that this is Satana Coalition, though. An outfit devoted to its own pleasure and high living. At least when off duty. And I am one of your employers."

"In that case," Sweetface said, a bit more of its old lightness in its voice, "perhaps after I get offcon you had best ... employ me!"

Without the double sets of equipment enjoyed by Jarps, Trafalgar and Quindarissa hadn't a chance in the Galaxy of performing the Jarp act known as a 138. They could and had, though, performed half that. Right now Trafalgar had something else in mind.

He fetched two fresh drinks from Stillwell. Into his own he popped an antinebrie tab. *The drink I just finished will hit me and that's plenty. But* "you've got some intercepting to do, my dear," he said as he handed her her drink.

"Easy course," she said. "Fast reactions, remember?"

"Ah yes. Well mine are probly slowed a bit right now, so ..." (He nearly said, "So maybe you'd better give me something to react to," but stopped himself. He knew it would only leave her in confusion. He had the urge—partly due to the alcohol, but also to a desire for variety—to let her take the lead, be the aggressor rather than the submissive slave-role she preferred ... in lovemaking.

(She couldn't. Either she didn't know how, or it simply didn't ignite her. Besides, Trafalgar definitely enjoyed the strong-handed mastery she so obviously needed.)

"So maybe I'd better get you started," he said. And he thought wryly: *When in Rome ...*

He removed his tunic as demonstratively as he could and tossed it on a chair. Standing a few meters in front of her where she sat on the bed, sipping her drink, he popped the meld of his belt and slowly slid his pants down his hips to

the cabin floor. He bent to remove both the pants and his boots. The evidence that the liquor hadn't completely dulled his reactions was immediately apparent. The evidence that it was apparent was also apparent, in the woman's heightened breathing as she stared at his groin.

She liked this display, this demonstration of what her man wanted—demanded—and he knew it. And this man did believe in giving his lover what he knew she wanted.

He approached her, watching her gaze remain on his erection until it stood, dark and daunting, seeps from her face. Only then did she look up into his face. She wore an open, questioning expression. Awaiting direction. That was part of their sexual relationship, and he played his role as usual.

He looked down at her with a steady, demanding gaze; a stare of simple expectation. He made a conscious effort to make his eyes stern and commanding. She liked words:

"Eat that," he said quietly.

She closed her eyes in happy, slavish acquiescence and lowered her face. Her thumb and forefinger closed on the shaft of his slicer. She slipped back the skin and took its broad tip into her mouth. Sliding and sucking it in, making a red carpet of her tongue, she moved the dark sheen of her face close to his hairless belly. His own eyes closed in reaction.

"Please me, wench, and we'll reconsider the decision to let you hang by your wrists in the dungeon all night."

She didn't smile; he actually saw the sensuous little shiver that ran through her. In and out, back and forth she slid, while he groaned. Legs starting to go quivery, he bent a little and stroked her cheek. She tilted her head, trapping his hand between her face and her shoulder—without releasing her oral grasp on his thickening erection.

He groaned again. Tugged his hand free, straightened. He swallowed. Ending it this way was not what he wanted

today, and he knew from her breathing that she was ready for more. He took her head firmly between his hands and moved it back, off him. Her little whimper was one more- part of their form of lovemaking.

Pushing her back down on the bed, he knelt on either side of her hips, still holding the sides of her face. When she lay flat on her back with his erect penis parallel to her body, he slid a hand into the center of her bando and tugged. It dragged at her breasts for a moment, then came free with an upward bounce and tremble of those firm warheads. He kissed the tip of each, in turn, and smiled at her delighted moan.

Her pants were a little harder, but eventually his hand was moving down her hairlessly sleek pubis, and into its cleft. He felt the ready dampness with two fingers that made her twitch.

For long minute after minute he moved his fingers within her and his mouth and other hand on her breasts. When she was panting hard and grasping at him, he seized her in the armpits and lifted her roughly, an arrogant rapist. Pushing her farther onto the bed was easy, with her cooperating in .5G. Her eyes glazed, she reached up for him. Her legs were wide-forked.

He had something else in mind.

Still straddling her, he grasped one buttock and tugged, lifting-easing her onto her side. She assumed that position, ever malleable. Leaning back, he drew one of her legs out from beneath him and draped it over his own leg. Then he reached down and quickly slipped himself into her. She gasped in surprise and pleasure as his slicer glided in, in.

Unfolding his legs, he stretched them out toward her head. He pressed their groins as tightly together as he could—which in this position was very tight indeed. They had become two old-style clothespins slid together lengthwise.

"Ummm," she sighed, pushing backward.

His legs forked her, one against her chest where he pressed hard against that firm, warhead-shaped breast. Its twin he took in his hand and toyed with it, crushingly, careful not to tug on the quartz nipple-ring inserted there. A souvenir of her captivity on Knor that she had chosen to retain, it matched those inserted through the flesh of each of her outer thighs.

She squirmed beneath him in mild pain and much pleasure. All the while he bestowed kisses upon the accessible portions of the leg she extended past his chest. Giving while seemingly taking—and delighting them both. His fingers like ten cables indenting the gleaming eggplant skin of her breast.

He began moving. Back and forth, pressing with his crotch, into her, squeezing her between his legs as he slid back, partway out. And in again, groins pressing. Glistening now, ignoring the annoying tickle of sweat below one of his arms, gripping her leg with one hand, moving the other from breast to clitoris—from warhead to flasher—now, tickling, her voice shrilling rhythmically in response. The tiny organ earned its nickname swiftly. She flashed, soared, screamed with release of tension, slamming her pubis against his so that even in his passion and delight he had to be mindful of his balls.

Then he lost all thoughts in sheer physicality. The mental part of him was gone, extinct, as all his being went shooting down through and out of his slicer and into the warm black stash between the legs of them both. Shuddering, willing himself squeezed, shaking. . then dropping down to lie draped between her, and she limply between him.

## 6

Morality is a private and costly luxury.

—Henry Adams

*"A substantial reward is offered for information leading to the apprehension of the perpetrator, or recovery of the stolen ship. A description follows, with ship's signatures for comm-recs . . ."*

"Cobs! Who'd be crass enough to offer a reward for this old tub?"

The slim, black-haired man with the pencil moustache leaned against his fist, elbow propped on the arm of the captain's chair. He looked genuinely amazed.

"The owner, no doubt," his mate replied.

"Fah! Some piece of burok who's been a loser all its life. Should be glad to be rid of this. . . thing." His contemptuous gesture took in the con-cabin and, by extension, the whole ship. "Not worth a jinkle anyway."

"Some people just don't have your advantages," the mate said.

"I make my advantages, Cluse," her captain said, missing the sarcasm: "Wait! There's more. . ."

" . . . captains are publicly demanding better onstation ssecurity," the holoivid newscast continued. "A spokesman, aptain Pentamahomet Ramzi known as Moosejaw' along

*the spaceways, is quoted as saying: 'What in Musla's name are spacefarers expected to do if their ships can't even be guaranteed onstation safety? We've come to a sorry pass when pirate scum like Manjanungo of Jorinne can steal a vessel right out of its docking bay!'"*

"Santa Maria! Someone who lets himself be known as Moosejaw dares call *me* names! 'Pirate scum' at that!"

"You are a pirate," his mate pointed out.

Manjanungo of Jorinne waved a hand with studied languour. "I am a sportsman. Piracy. ... that is incidental. One must pay expenses. The rewards go to the skillful. That is how it should be."

"In that case let's hope no one skillful attempts to claim the reward for this ship: Or for you."

"Two rewards for me, Cluse. Don't forget Jorinne. Ha! For stealing *my own* ship, that time. Getting away with SolSec right on my tail."

"They missed your tail and your trail too, evidently," Cluse said. "You really won that one, Captain. Firm."

This time Manjanungo caught the sarcastic tone.

"It's hardly my fault if I was done in on Jorinne by incompetent swine," he said hotly, and the tiny moustache danced. "Those bugs let pleasure interfere with commerce, something that those in our line cannot afford."

Cluse decided against mentioning her captain's personal *harem*-attired slave girl/attendant.

"The grats nearly broke my poor father's heart as well as destroying my most profitable operation," Manjanungo said. "Now this Mooseface scut adds scorn to scandal. MY father will surely hear this newscast." ---

As if in answer, the comm filled the silence beyond his words by saying:

*"Clan-chief Manjarik Jacath of Jorinne, father of Manjanungo. is said to be bewildered and shamed by this latest exploit of his outlaw son. He had hardly had time to accept*

the fact of Manjanungo's having secretly headed the biggest slave-trading organization on their home planet, an operation broken up by Captain Bamuna of MSU Komodi and Prefect Cosi of Soljer Station recently, when. . ."

"Shamed!" Manjanungo shouted as he violently buttoned off the vid. "My father shamed! That is what they have done to me, Cluse." He thrust up from his chair and began stalking the cabin. His black clothing rustled.

"Perhaps if you hadn't operated so close to home the disgrace could have been . . ."

"Disgrace! Never use that word with me, Cluse! You of all people. Speak of disgrace! Santa! A cashiered TGW flag officer talks to me of disgrace. And consider your station, woman. You are second mate here—"

"First."

"—*acting* first, rated second. You *were* a station commander, a captain and a first before that. Thanks to me you're back in a position of responsibility."

"An acting first: You need a first. I'm capable of filling that position and always have been. . . Captain."

Manjanungo stopped pacing. He leaned on the back of his chair and glared at the ship's mate with narrowed eyes.

"I demand two things of my people, Cluse. Competence and loyalty. That flainer of a First I left on Jorinne lacked the latter., Oh, he was competent. Nothing like those two fobbers who wrecked my operation by deciding to stage a bondage-and-sadism sexaria with a couple of very competent slaves who wiped their tapes for them."\*

"Do you question my loyalty, Captain?"

"No," Manjanungo . said, more quietly. He resumed his pacing, remaining silent for a time. He appeared to be deliberating something.

Cluse Famine of Mirjam watched her Captain. He wore

\* see *Spacways #8, under Twin Suns*

his usual affected attire, adopted from tapes of some old Homeworld culture or other. Slim-fitting suit of flat black embroidered with paisley squiggles of a contrasting glossy jet thread. Notched lapels, also glossy jet, showing between them a ruffled white shirt hung with a droopy black string tie. Snowy lace cuffs and tall, high-heeled boots that made a clicking sound and garnered him much attention on the street (and caused annoyance here at the con). Wavy short-cropped hair, also black (and oiled!) and the moustache— an extremely unusual touch—completed his impressive indoor appearance.

(Outdoors or otherwise in public, Manjanungo added a satin cloak lined in maroon and a flat-crowned sable hat with a broad flat brim and a chin thong.)

*Who the vug's he trying to impress out here?* Cluse thought tiredly as she watched him pace. *Me?*

She knew better. *Himself.*

He said the apparel was that of a grandee, whatever that was. He laced his speech with expressions and swearbys in the language of the grandees, picked up from other tapes— tapes far older than Jorinne, Cluse assumed. *Santa Maria* was a favorite, often shortened to *Santa*. Manjanungo had no idea what it meant.

He stopped pacing again and turned to his mate. He raised his chin, taking on his most dignified posture.

"No, Cluse, I do not question your loyalty. I question your competence."

Cluse Faneline half-turned in her seat, shocked.

"Captain! I have worked my way up from LS in your service. Earned every promotion even though I was still a licensed S2. You insisted upon that and I raised no objection—"

"I took yer on when no one else would. I was not about to call attention to myself by placing yer above your station."

"Firm. Keeping up appearances. Well, I've proven my

capabilities. I could pass the test for S1 as soon as we hit the the Tri-System Accord."

"You've done your job," Manjanungo said. "And been paid handsome shares."

"Then where," Cluse asked, "am I lacking competence?"

Manjanungo shook his head in disbelief, as if the answer should be evident. "Look at yer! You look. . . *tired*." The word came out a sneering insult. "You sag in your seat. You're overweight and look your age. You are—drab. Since TGW, you've cared nothing for your appearance or your attitude. The 'appearances' you seem to scorn are of prime importance to me. To our business. My officers must show that attitude to others, even—perhaps especially—to the walking cargo."

"I'm a spacefarer! I pilot ships, and damned well. I was never trained as a slaver. Still—"

"Precisely. You are not a slaver. That is our business, you know. I need a first who is more accomplished in that calling. Someone. . . tougher."

*Tougher, Cluse thought. More brutal, you mea.*

"Would I be correct to assume," she said, "that you hope to find a new first on Andor?"

"Everyone and its clone will be there for the Great Race, including many out-of-work 'farers. Firm."

"And me?"

"You'll stay on as second—if yer wish."

Cluse rubbed her eyes With a trembling hand. *Gods, he's right about one thing—I am tired!* "Firm, Captain," she said very quietly. "I wish."

"Excellent. Aha! *Darvish!*"

"Grunt?"

"We'll call this scow *Darvish*. Get a couple of the crew suited up to go out there and repaint."

Just that fast the subject was closed and Manjanungo was back to attending to business. He couldn't stay upset long in

any case. Not with thoughts of the Race to cheer him. Five years ago he had taken a third—his first time in the Race. This was his year, he knew. His yacht—the spacer on which he had escaped Jorinne—was already in the T-SA undergoing refitting and tuning. It was the fastest ship he had ever known and the best equipped. That at least was not mere appearance, and made part of the prize redundant. Manjanungo's ship already boasted a CAGSVIC, top of the line.

Meanwhile he was forced to travel and conduct business in this weary old boat, *The Other Brother*, about-to-be *Darvish*. Not that bad a ship, really. Plenty of cargo space. Space nearly full now, as they had just taken two ships en route and stopped off to raid a small town on Samanna. Manjanungo was coming into the T-SA with a hold full of walking cargo and a second vessel in tow.

(He'd have to change its name too, from *Double Shuffle*, by now reported missing along with its partner, *Archduke Dobro*. That one they'd not be likely to find since it had genuinely disappeared from the spaceways. Manjanungo had filled it with corpses and the remaining crew of both ships, and jam-crammed it. Popped it into tachyon conversion with no preparation, no search for a safe conversion point. Probably wandering around the Dark Universe right now, if "now" meant anything there. If the ship still existed at all. If the Dark Universe did.)

He would sell both ships within the Tn.-System Accord/ T-SA. His operation there was thankfully intact. He hoped to expand it following the Race. Which he of course would win. (Under an assumed name, naturally. But those who counted would know who he was. Warmaug Jaranit and the other big slave-buying farmers, for example.)

That would compensate for the loss on Jorinne. It would also prove that Manjanungo was out from under the mantle of his father. Prove he was his own man.

Prove he was the best!

"We'll have to save the really dirty stuff for the Race proper, of course. . . ."

"You really think we'll get in?"

". . . Well, what I'm saying is, we can still manage to cheat our way through the trial heats. Pos, we'll get in if there's any justice in dirty tricks."

The boy grinned at the girl seated across from him in the con-cabin. Boy. Most spacefarers looked young, usually choosing an apparent age of mid-twenties to thirty or thereabouts, sometimes adding a touch of gray or some eye wrinkles—just a hint—as distinguishing features. Once they'd actually reached their mid-twenties, that is.

This young had not. He really *was* a boy, of apparent and actual age twenty. The girl was all of eighteen.

"Dirty tricks won't carry us the whole way, Ulf," she said.

"Neg. They'll give us the edge. We're not as good as others who'll be entered, but we're far from-bad. Didn't we fight a losing duel in a crippled ship and win?\* Aren't we captain and first of our very own ship? And did it cost us a blessed silver stell?"

"I still can't believe Zo would give us a whole ship out of gratitude. Not that it was really his ship. ...

Ulf snorted. "He didn't give us Vettering's ship out of gratitude. He did it for the same reason we're going to use those dirty tricks: insurance. Zo knew we'd take his own ship out from under him if he ever gave us a chance. No; once we learned enough to *make* a chance. Better he got us out of his pony-tailed hair first. He was a good teacher to us, Captain Zo. Taught *you* a lot."

"I believe the good Captain's woman provided similar

\* For the story of Ulf and Alianora, see Spaceways #12, Star Slaver

instruction for you, Ulf. We could have learned together if you'd read my signals earlier."

Ulf chuckled and admired her pushy chest. Again.

"Really, though, your late husband taught me a great deal before ever we left Nevermind. All his political machinations, which I largely handled for him, showed me the necessity of playing my cards close to my chest. Which is why, Alianora, we are *not* going to rename *Golden Pork-chop* either *Space Reefer* or *High Zap*, as you suggested."

"What's wrong with them? I think they're *cute*."

"There's your answer," he said. "Too cute. Too ... adol."

She swelled her estimable bosom self-consciously, girlishly, but frowned. "Too what?"

"Adol. Adolescent. Really, Alianora, drug references? How to call attention to us and make us look freshbaked in one easy lesson."

"Oh... What, then?"

"I've already called it in to Race HQ. You'll love it."

"Tell me!"

"*Starsucker!*"

Alianora smiled in delight, and clapped her hands. "*Star-sucker!* Soon to be one of the Galaxy's most advanced ships, with its own CAGSVIC and a pile of money to plow back into business."

"The only kind of plowing I ever hope to do again," Ulf said, "aside from plowing you, Ali. If I never see a hectare of azaafunn or even a farm again it'll be too soon. The only yellow I ever want to see is your hair! Even if it is the color of the whole damned planet."

"My hair is not yellow! It's hazel—almost," Alianora said.

"No such color as hazel. Ever seen hazel paint? It's blond then; how's that? So is Nevermind. Looks good on you but hideous on our planet. To meltdown with the whole flainin' place."

-Ah, but Nevermind had its value for us, if you're right about that stuff," Alianora said. "By the way, will anyone be able to trace it

"Neg. I don't think anybody even knows the origin of the old stuff they used on oil back in the Empire Wars. That strain's all gone now, naturally. Died out along with oil when the far-better permalube came in. Not too many people know about this new strain. Factor Jaris did. Matter of business. He'd have done anything to keep the locals ignorant of technological developments that would've lessened his profits. Including sabotaging incoming ships."

"Smart man I married."

Ulf nodded without satire. "Smart enough to cover his signatures. The bacteria feed only on lube, as far as anyone knows. They starve when all available food is gone. And they can't migrate along foodless paths. So—no evidence."

"Suppose someone finds out before the lube is all gone."

Ulf shrugged. "True God, Alianora, I never said this business would be guaranteed safe. We risked a lot just going back to Nevermind for the stuff. It was you taught me to take risks, remember? Seducing me when Jaris was out of the house...."

"And then all that chaos, all those fraggers bursting into the room, and we didn't even finish!" She threw her head the back laughed at what had been anything but funny at the time.

"Speaking of finishing," Ulf said, "it's about time for me to key out

"I'll get Ig to take over con."

Ulf sighed. "Who ever heard of a ship with only one crewmember capable of relieving the captain?"

Alainora flipped her fingers. "We could do better than this crew of alley bugs. We should dump 'em before the Race if possible."

"Well, they are useful in our work if not in running this

hulk. Eissa for one turned out to be a damned good slave catcher."

"She's a bit too free at placidating for my tastes."

Her very young lover gave her a look. "Since when are we developing scruples?"

"We're developing caution, I hope," Alianora said. "I don't give a rat's ass who anybody kills as long as that hold has cargo. I do care if those killings put the nippers on our trail."

"I'll talk to her. I hope I won't have to go so far as to injure her. We need whole crew. I didn't *enjoy* it, that time I had to make that jacko put his own eye out to keep from losing control of that hold full of cargo."

"Poor Ulf," she said in mock concern. "So hard being a big tough leader."

Yet neither his tone nor his eyes had changed. Hurting people was ... troublesome, that was all.

"That's not all that's hard," he said, reaching across the space between their chairs to fondle one of her pushy warheads.

"What say we *make* Licensed Spacefarer Igeya be available, hm?"

"Mm. The Captain did say something about—needing relief. ... ?" Alianora's giggle was distinctly girlish.

## 7

Things will probably come out all right. But lord lord!—if only we didn't have to endure the getting there!

—Trafalgar Cuw

Kalahari Cuw was cruising. She had been doing quite a bit of cruising lately. Nothing much came of it. Oh, she scored, trysted, soared, flashed/got laid, but with one exception none of those partners acquired for the night proved more than a partner for the night. The exception was improbably named Muhamma Trebizond, also not native to Terasald. Her face was good, with darling dimples, and her body was

good, with darling flowing curves, and conversation with her was fun. So was sex.

Kalahari had given that more-than-attractive girl several signals, and on their third get-together she felt confident enough to play pretend-bondage. Muhamma Trebizond went along, and it was good. Except that just as she was leaving, she said, "I really, really enjoyed that, Kally, and that scares me, and I'll never never do it again."

And she left, and that was that.

It wasn't that Kalahari was broken up or shattered. She was surprised, and badly disappointed. She had been moping a lot before Hamma Trebizond, who had lifted her spirits

more than somewhat. After Hamma she went right back to moping. And cruising. And the sleeping pills.

Wealthy, she had remained on Terasaki in "retirement" as a lady—a Lady"—while the others of the Satana Colition went off in spaceship *Sunmother* in search of Janja. So it was a big galaxy; so they had suffered plenty and now they were essing rich, and what else did they have to do?

Kalahari Cuw's real reason for staying behind on Terasald was the same as their reason for leaving. To try to get a line on the missing member of the Satana Coalition. *Sunmother's* owner: Janja of Aglaya. It was on Terasaki, in its capital city of Yamato, that she had disappeared.

Kalaha!i Cuw, formerly captain of spacer *Satana* and now wearing her third name, had not found Janja. She had found luxury and loneliness and even had time to wonder- if they went together. She had too much time. She even took up yoga, and meditation, and had a go at studying the Tao.

Then one day the Coalition had showed up at her mod— a room, not even a suite—in the Akihabara Hotel and off she went again. With the Satana Coalition: former crew of spaceship *Satana*, minus one and plus another: Trafalgar and Quindy and Cinnabar and Sweetface and a lovely scary stressful adventure.

Once again they had almost got themselves killed, though this time it was not because they were led by Captain Hellfire. It couldn't even be said to have been Quindy's fault. Nevertheless, the Satana Coalition was right back in trouble again, and almost got its collective self killed.\*

They had not found Janja and Kalahari had not found relief or release in letting herself be Justined by that weird Tura ak Saiping.

It hadn't been as much fun as it used to be, either, and

In SPACEWAYS #17, *The Carnadyne Horde*

here she was back in Yamato. Had been for the past month. Spending money. (It was a Class apt-for-apartment she took, definitely. It should have been, too: it cost enough.) Thinking. Drinking. Trying to be. . . to Be. Just to Be. And Cruising. Cruising.

Tonight she had scored twice. Rather she had been ap-proached twice, but by men. Kalahari Cuw wasn't interested in men. They made their approaches, they tried; she got rid of them; nobody scored. Looked as if the evening and the new designer outfit were a waste. Shit. Damn! Hell fire!

She was elegantly draped in a loose-unto-baggy blouson top of dark red velvon. It snugged in at the waist only, and the matching pants were fitted to the body only in the butt. The flat boots were of an earth-toned orange-brown suede, very soft, and she wore orange-red ear pendants. (Her ears showed, now that she had dyed her hair white-blond and whacked it off to a Janja-like length.) The matched pants- set made her almost extreme thinness a sexy virtue. A bigger woman would have appeared to be wearing a tent.

Thus elegantly geared, she sat nursing her drink in the lounge unimaginatively called *Shogun*, while not-quite watching the print of the sub-ancient mellerdrarnmer called *Seven Samurai*, obviously re-taped (only fairly well) hol°grammatically for presentation in such 2 x 3-meter cubes as this one in Shogun. Drinking, thinking, moping, and feeling sorry for herself.

"A dozen pardons, Lady," a voice said, and she looked up at a waiter wearing a properly submissive look. "Say only that you desire to be alone and so it shall be. However every table is occupied and one wonders if this honored person might share your table."

Kalahari had not looked at him after the first instant she tried not to gawk as she let her gaze run like hot mercury over the honored person" standing beside him. And above him. The honored person was magnificent!

Working at being casual and merely neighborly, Kalahari gestured. "Sit down, honored person," she said, with a tiny smile.

"Bring me a Musla's Heaven and this kind lady another of those," the tall woman said, and folded herself into the chair. Not across from Kalahari, but on her left. Kalahari felt leg—a meter or more of warm firm leg—and moved hers a little while the woman said "Oh, sorry. Please excuse me," and the waiter said "Thank you lady," and departed.

"Thank you," the woman said, smiling more beautifully than prettily, "for letting me share your table."

Kalahari gave her a direct look. "No problem. My name is Kalahari Cuw."

"No!" The other's eyes lit and her smile broadened. "I am Valustriana See. Well met in Shogun on Terasaki! I haven't seen another Outie in weeks! I'm from over near Decorford, orginally—you?"

Kalahari stared steadily at the taller woman, into those impossible and *beautiful* olive-colored eyes. At last she said flatly, "Outreach."

After a time Valustriana See looked down. "Sorry. I blurted. I'm sorry, Cuw-sama. I do tend to blurt."

Kalahari chuckled. "Better call me Kalahari," she said. "The thing is, Outreach was a long time ago and I'm not at all interested in talking about it." *Since my studying the planet I claim to be from hasn't made me knowledgeable enough to talk about it with "another" native!* "I am interested in company, though, Valustriana See. I've seen this holo before. Actually it's a pre-holo and I think they overact. Difference in eras and styles, I guess."

She paused, looked up to say "Thank you" to the waiter who set down two drinks, and waited until the other woman had her plass to her lips. Then:

"I'd estimate that there are fifteen or so tables available, and another thirty with males anxious to welcome you, and

two seats at the bar that I can see from here. So you persuaded our waiter to bring you over here, and lie for you. We could talk about that, Valustriana See."

Over the rim of her glass, a startled See peered at her with large olivine eyes.

At last she sipped, sipped again. Nodded. Sat back. A man-tall woman in a long-sleeved silver turtlenecked bodyshirt that Kalahari had already noticed had a crotch-closure. Below it she might as well have worn nothing, save for the color interest. The skinnTite hose or leotards were the color of ripe plums. Gliding without a wrinkle, naturally, into boots of black suede that were lower in front than in back. Knee-cappers.

*Dresses to emphasize those meter-long legs, Kalahari mused. Certainly she has no need of emphasizing that chest—it'd call attention to itself if she wore a Sektent!*

A lot of things were noticeable about Valustriana See. Notable among the noticeables was her bilobate chest. She had a lot of it. And of course a lot of shapely, if not quite so pushy, leg.

"I was at the bar, Kalahari. Just sipping a Pale. I saw you. Admired you. Saw a man have a try at you—a good-looking man, and well set up." That full, attractive smile flashed again. "He tried me, too. So, you and I have that in common. We're both attractive and alone and we both turned down an attractive male. So I cooked up my little plot, and paid that waiter. You're too smart for me. Girlish of me, hmm?" She ducked her head charmingly.

Feeling a rising excitement and yet the sensation of being nicely in charge, Kalahari stayed cool. "I'd call it clever. Girlish, maybe — so what? I said yes to the waiter and I'll tell you straighton that you re the sexiast woman I've seen in longer'n it's been since you met a fellow Outie. So I'm from Rock Lake but let's talk about the very attractive Valustriana See."

"Well, I studied psychology and sociology but somehow I've wound up as P.R. flakker for Hojatocorp," the tall woman with jet hair and olive eyes began, and went on.

They talked over an hour and over another drink—with most of the talk being lies—and they left, the dramatically leggy woman making the other look both tiny and short (she was neither, just lean unto bony) while nearly every male in Shogun watched them and quite a few females too, and eighteen minutes later Valustriana was admiring Kalahari's pastoral-scene apt. A drink was mentioned but within' a dozen mins more they were admiring each other's bared body, and they did something about that.

They were marvelous for each other. Sound baffles swallowed the screams of ecstasy and of completion.

Then Kalahari went to the sitter, and stopped off at the bar. She returned to the sprawling, furry bedroom with a couple of brandies and Valustriana, seated-sprawled nakedly in the rumpled bed, flashed her little Bluejoy-sticks pak and demonstrated its working. It vaporized a lovely jade Buddha that had cost her host several times the rent on an expensive apt. Then Valustriana mentioned three shocking initials and issued an order.

"Sit down, Captain Hellfire."

Shaken and feeling suddenly drained, Kalahari did her best to stare daggers, darts and number Three settings. "Do you plan to kill me?"

"I absolutely do not. Do you plan to force me?"

"No," Captain Hellfire said, tossing the two snifters into a corner with a crash and sad tinkling of real crystal. "I absolutely do not. I also am not going to sit down naked. Just keep your nasty little sisterslicing whoremongering Poofert*hing* trained on me, you rot-stashed motherlicker, while I put on a robe."

"Please don't try anything. Oh—got one for me?"

Kalahari turned from the closet to show her guest and

erstwhile bedmate a molten stare. "Go sit on an antenna complex," she said, and turned away to withdraw a robe. Clothed, she returned to the chair a few feet from the bed and sat. Glaring.

Her stomach rolled and roiled. She had been tricked, brilliantly and wickedly, and made to feel the fool, and taken like a fool. Naturally she was truculent and abusive; what other way was there for her to behave?

They sat in silence, the one naked on the bed, long legs outstretched and the false pak held just as negligently, and the other robed with her legs crossed tightly. Seething inside and trying not to let it show.

"Do you keep a weapon in that robe?"

"No. You said TGO and I'm not fool enough to try anything. Going to show me some Gray Organization ID?"

"No."

"It was a filthy rotten trick. Beneath even TGO. There were other ways to get me."

Valustriana nodded and looked pained, or nearly. "I— wanted . . ." She started again. "You're a damned good lay, Kalahari Cuw."

"Forget the antenna complex and go sit on a flagpole, whore. When it's midnight do you have to give those tits back to the cow?"

Valustriana breathed in and exhaled in a long sigh. "I gave you my true name and I do represent TGO. My assignment was to get you for a talk, without a fight, without force. Other than holding this on you, of course."

Kalahari/Hellfire stared.

Valustriana repeated the resigned sigh. "Right, then. You are not under arrest and you are not my prisoner. Not—"

"Oh well in that case get your fat ass and floppy warheads out of my apt and let me start in fumigating the bed."

Valustriana See swallowed. "Not, I was about to say, exactly. You have become wealthy and retired from the

Hellfire/*Satana* life of piracy. Meanwhile a large number of people suffers. Many are members of the Delventine Colony, which you raided and looted a year-ess ago. No one has forgotten. You are to repay the colony, plus ten per cent interest. A business transaction. You don't even have to do it personally. The cred can be wired, if you wish. It's a lot of cred, as you know—you did well on that raid. Still, you have plenty more now, and we see no reason to break you, just now."

She named the figure to be paid over to the Delventiners. A year-standard ago Kalahari had been a different person. She hadn't been enslaved, demeaned and repeatedly raped, used on Knor, a year-ess ago, and left with the ring in her nipple that was subsequently used by those two slime on Jorinne to tether her, for use. The horror of those experiences, along with her relationship with Trafalgar Cuw and Janja—all had contributed to the change in her. Captain Hellfire was vicious, destructive, and self-destructively hostile. Kalahari was neither—until tonight—though she naturally had natural thoughts about suicide now and again.

Orange-haired, volatile Captain Hellfire had surely been incapable of remorse. Janja-haired Kalahari ruw was not ... and she was relieved.

She nodded. "Right. Done. I'll do it. I won't be rich any longer, but...I've thought too much about those people, and what I stole from them. I didn't give a damn about anyone, then, and—"

"Now you do?"

Kalahari returned that level gaze. "Now I do. So you're doing me a favor. It's your *methods* that are slimy and should be flushed, you rotten, rot-stashed cow-titted treacherous trickstering mare's ass."

Valustriana nodded. "The idea was to arrange to have this talk when I was sure you didn't have a weapon to hand and couldn't run or attract a lot of attention. I ...didn't

play it that way because I wanted to go to bed with you. Hel—Kalahari, mah feller Outie. You are one sexy woman. I loved it and you made me feel great and now I feel as rotten as you say." She sighed, with much movement of her bared breastworks. "I wanted you to know that."

Kalahari stared. From this sexy slime she wanted no favors and no soft soap. *If I'm making her feel bad—good. She's hit me harder than anyone, ever.*

How much longer she'd be able to maintain her act she wasn't sure. She felt all cold. She had never felt so used, so shaken in her life—not even with those creepy slavers on Knor and the two Joser monsters. She felt dirty, destroyed. The shock was more massive than this Gray Organization agent's big warhead-shaped warheads.

Kalahari held the mask in place. And stared. Wanting to kill—and yet not really, not feeling at all like Hellfire.

"I want something else of you, Kalahari," Valustriana said at last.

"If it's another tumble in bed," Kalahari was proud to say, "you'd better just zap me now. You'd be a fate worse than death."

"You ... sure know how to hurt a girl," the naked TGO agent said.

That shattered every bit of Kalahari's composure, wiped off the impassively staring mask, and blew away every pretense of cool. "*Hurt! You—*" And she broke down.

Val See waited, observing the piteous little woman in the great big robe without seeming to stare. Meanwhile she reminded herself of the catalog of the crimes of Captain Hellfire, the pirate with the stopper ever set on Three.

Then it was her turn to maintain the mask and Do The Job, as she told the ex-pirate that TGO wanted her to captain a ship in the Great Five-year Race. That was a mandate; the alternative was imprisonment and trial and imprisonment. She was tight-mouthed about the why of it, too.

Kalahari Cuw was seeing the face of TGO. It was impressive/impassive and inexorable, and just like that there wasn't one thing sexy about Agent See, TransGalactic Order.

They left the apt a while later, each carrying a go-bag though only one was armed. Across town to the spaceport, and up to the orbiting doughnut of a space station. The ship was a better than good one, Kalahari was pleased to find, while she was assured that there was not a personal weapon Onboard save for Valustriana's stopper and her deadly Bluejoy pak.

Within another half-hour they swept out into the twinkling parsec abyss of interstellar space. Captain Cuw wore baggy, sloppy clothing and left her hair unattended and said very, very little. She also slept alone, again. Still.

## 8

These troublesome disguises which we wear . . .

—John Milton

We believe in freedom, and we intend to be associated with it in days to come.

—John F. Kennedy

She wriggled about on top of him, breasts bobbing lightly in the low G of planet Andor, T-SA. She had gotten used to trysting in low gravity onboard ship. It had produced some funny moments at first, such as the time she had gotten to moving up and down with such abandon that they had come unplugged and she had sortabounced off the bed over his head and onto the floor.

Now, accustomed to the condition, she held onto the backs of his legs with her hands as she straddled his hips. Holding back a little, not pumping on his swollen slicer as hard as her muscular legs would permit, produced tantalizingly exciting sensations of denial. Of being constantly on the edge without quite being able to go over. Of soaring Without allowing herself to flash.

The eternal contradiction of coitus: desire—but deny, delay.

It proved especially difficult for a woman of Aglaya. The stereotype held that there were no frigid women on Aglaya.

No one had seriously challenged that. For one thing Aglayan women were circumcised at birth. Its little hood removed, the clitoris—which she had come to call, with Galactics, her *flasher*—was forever exposed to pleasure.

She was exquisitely aware of that exposure and that pleasure now, which was why she held back. Of course the man beneath her was also Aglayan, also circumcised, and exceptionally skilled at bringing pleasure to a woman. To women. The Galactic women he had trysted with called him Flash.

No matter. That was past. He was with her now, and he had learned quickly that what he gave so generously to Galactic women with their depilated but still-hooded sexual equipment, he had to parcel out to this easily-triggered Aglayan.

Thus his fingers only teased. Darting into and out of the platinum hair of her loins, flicking at her flash-spot intermittently, keeping it primed without granting it release.

She did much the same for him. Rising and falling like a carousel animal on its pole, faster, to a peak, then more slowly, easing off. Listening to his breathing and unconscious vocalizing, judging his level of excitement. Sometimes she stopped completely, with her pale thatch pressed to his, damp hairs intertwined. Thighs rubbing together, sweat-slippery, she tightened pelvic muscles to squeeze his stiffness.

The squeezing grew to wriggling, the wriggling to rocking, the rocking to sliding once again. This time, by the bodily communication possessed by some fortunate lovers, they both knew it was the final time. The time to let go. Up and down to her full extent she bounced, and his fingers tickled and teased against her flasher without letup.

It hit her suddenly and she let herself go over to it. Releasing more tension than she realized she had, but still

moving, gasping, moving, knowing the time wasn't long. He rose to meet her, gasping. Yelling. He lifted her despite her downpushing, and she had to rock to one side to keep from falling off him. He held her suspended above the bed for a timeless moment. She felt the wet warmth of his seed hit her, felt his swelling impossibly swell more, bursting within her.

Then he relaxed and sagged to the bed, wet and panting. She propped her hands on either side of his chest: with her head, hair, and breasts hanging toward him. Finally she lowered her body against his. She grunted as her cramped legs left their positions and came to rest atop his. They slept.

They awoke to the sounds of birds and wind and children. Birds sang in the trees outside the window. The wind clattered the bare branches that should have held whispering leaves but had been denuded by the locust swam Children called in the distance.

Children. "Whitey, listen," she said against his cheek. "Mmp?"

"Children playing. Hear it? I can't remember when I last heard that. It makes me so . . . relaxed. So peaceful. Do you know?"

"Mp. Pos. I know. Off in the distance on a soft day.

Used to listen to 'em at home. Aglii, it has been a time."

"It's because of the way you live. We live. Either onboard or in a city, all the time. Or *way* out in the country raiding Jaranit Farms. But to be here in the ... what do you call it?"

"Suburbs."

... the suburbs," she said, "where it's quiet except for the children."

"And except for us grunting and screaming." He raised

his head, scratching his still-damp albescent hair, and smiled at her. "Maybe we should have turned on Dorjan's flow field."

"I'm sure the 'neighbors have heard it all before."

"You don't suppose the Sa'eede behave that way, do you? Nice respectable planetside couple like them?"

"Where do you think they got that nice respectable baby, Mate?" She ruffled his hair.

"Cute little fobber, isn't he?" Whitey said. She rolled off him as he sat upright. "Tao, Pransa! Children. . . *babies*. We're going to get so domesticated here we won't want to go back up to *Rambler*."

"We'll be domesticated in an Andorite jail if we don't. This is the wrong place to get attached to."

"It does seem odd, doesn't it! In this peaceful place, to think that we're fugitives?"

"At least not recognizable fugitives," Pransa said, "with our natural color restored and that downer beard off you. By the way, you scratched me that time. You need a shave again."

He rubbed his stubbled chin with one hand. The genen-gineered whiskers were barely visible now that the skindye had dissipated. They were growing out the color of his hair, lighter even than Pransa's, which was the color of the diffuse sunshine of their mutual planet Aglaya.

He got off the bed and crossed the room to pluck his jumpsuit off a chair. Unmelding the nevelcro cuff of one sleeve, he removed a small black object, thin and flat. He turned it over speculatively in his hand.

"Never thought I'd be scraping my face and wounding myself with this," he said.

She looked at him as she pondered a question. She decided to ask it.

"Have you ever used that on anyone?"

He glanced at her, then away, remembering. "Pos, once.

Didn't remove the flainer. Only cut him a bit. In a bar on Franji. He cut me, too. That's where I got this scar." He pointed to the corner of his mouth. "It was partly my fault. Just wearing this Bleaker tackle seems to offend some people. That was when I gave it up. Till recently.

"You always carried a knife, though."

"Pos. That's how I did in those narcobums who assaulted Janja on Resh. Old habits are hard to break. The time I spent on Bleak convinced me of the worth of a non-powered weapon."

"Bleak must be quite a place," Pransa said.

"That's about all it is. The most honestly-named place in the Galaxy. There's an old joke—never mind."

"Funny. We'd be safer there right now."

Whitey nodded. He stood, carefully holding the Bleaker sleeve-knife—a surgically-sharp obsidian sliver—and headed for the door.

Pransa watched him move, smiling fondly at his tight little buttocks. Then she wrapped a sheet around her and followed.

"You really should put your pants on before walking around the house," she admonished him as they entered the sitter.

"I thought the Sa'eeds were out," he called back.

"Double-P and Spinner aren't," she said, joining him.

"They're as unused to immodest spacefarers as our hosts."

"I'm just not used to living in a small house with only one sitter. Been onboard or in hotels for too many years. Actually I doubt that Loomie, I mean Double-P, would be offended. Spinner certainly wouldn't! I'd rather not start it lusting after me, though."

Pransa sighed. "Poor Spinner. It's lost without its music

"Thank Tao they've actually got running water in this place." Whitey began soaping his face at the sink. "Can

you see me trying to shave with this knife in a sonishower?"

"You'd have more than that one scar on your face if you did."

Whitey drew the obsidian sliver over his cheek. Almost immediately he exclaimed "Ya!" A thin spot of red appeared in the lather.

"I'm going to be scarred anyway," he said. "How did people used to do this? Don't the Sa'eeds have instruments? For Spinner to play, I mean."

"Pos," Pransa said. "They said it would probly be risky for it to use them, though. Could be heard outside and somebody might realize it wasn't Modan or Khorana playing. Same reason they asked Spinner and Double-P to stay down in the basement. Some of the neighbors have seen and heard Spinner before. And there are descripts out on both of them."

"They must be going fraggy in that cellar," Whitey said in a nasal tone—he was pinching his nostrils upward in

order to shave his lip. "We've got to start deciding how to get off this flaming planet. We're safe enough here for a while, I guess—"

"Thanks to Spinner. Imagine it knowing these people! Modan and Khorana Sa'eed hardly seem the type to be orbiting with Jarp slaves."

"Art makes strange crewmates, Pransa. Double-P told me that Jaranit had Spinner perform at various ethnic festivals. A sensation among the local folk music community. The Sa'eeds are devotees and invited Spinner to visit."

"And Jaranit let it?"

Whitey flipped five, splattering soap on the mirror. "Where would it go? Trusted domestic slaves have a fair amount of freedom, Pransa. When I was a farm slave on Jahpur, I was allowed to visit some artist friends in the city. Jaranit knew his slave was no 'farer and these people were not likely to cross Jaranit Limited."

"Won't this be a logical place to look for Spinner, then?"

"Jaranit evidently didn't even know their names. He was above fraternizing with these locals himself. Anyway Jaranit's dead. Likely he wouldn't have told Taurence much about it. Ouch!"

Pransa shook her head. "They're amazing people, to risk their lives for us. We owe it to them to redshift as quickly as possible."

"Meanwhile being as cautious as possible," Whitey said. "So—no music and stay in the cellar. And use new nicknames." He chuckled. "Poor Spinner! If we could only get the poor thing a translahelm. It had such a time getting out that suggestion for Loomie. `P-P!' Tao, I thought Loomie was going to poke it in the eye!"

"I got called that all during my childhood,— Pransa said, mocking the Outie's voice. "Well, Double-P is easy to remember."

"For *us*. They had no idea it referred to a spaceship drive."

"Tribemother's grace, Whitey—will we ever see space again?"

"Double-P said she had an idea she wanted to talk to us about. A way of getting offplanet." He wiped the remaining soap—and blood—off his face with a towel. "Let's go see."

"Uh, possibly you ought to join me under this sheet until we get our clothes? In case the Sa'eeds have returned? Or unless you want to, uh, get cozy with Spinner."

He did join her. They were quite a while retrieving their lothes and going to talk to Double-P.

"Of course I know about the Five-Year Race," Whitey told the Outie. "Every 'farer does. I don't see how it can help us though, Double-P."

"TGO backs the race," Petaluma Peeh told him. "Oh,

individual entries are funded by the big corporations, but the machinery is TGO's. I heard Jaranite telling Taurence about it the night you came. TGW runs the Race, naturally, since it has jurisdiction. The Race covers half the Galactic Hub, after all. But TGO is at bottom."

"Why?" Whitey asked.

"I might know if you hadn't come through the window when you did! It had something to do with the fact that the best captains are always competing."

"Hm. Recruitment, maybe," Pransa said.

"Perhaps." Double-P shrugged. "The point is this: Race crews are not as carefully screened as other outsiders passing through T-SA ports. I knew that before I knew TGO was involved. Jaranit's brother was a Race Inspector last time, and Jaranit sent me to assist him. Guv-clerk burok. There wasn't much to do. If a qualified captain vouched for its crew, that was about it."

"You mean-" Whitey began.

"I mean," Double-P said, "that people come in and out of Customs like cattle during the Race. Red tape is kept to a minimum and T-SA goes along—tourist revenue, you know. With the actual Race crews, there's no red tape at all. That's going a little far for Tr-System Police, but they can't do a thing about it. TransGalactic Watch has superior jurisdiction."

"We're wanted criminals," Pransa pointed out.

Double-P flipped five. "Local affair. Big, but local. That's now TGW will see it. That's how even the local big businesses will see it. They may not like slave raiders, but they like losing Race revenues even less. And they will, if crews are investigated too closely."

Whitey smiled. "Some of those captains would lose their best crewmembers if their credentials were *really* examined!"

"Some of those captains would lose themselves," Double-P said. "Manjanungo's racing."

He raised his eyebrows. "That pirate from Jorinne who's so much in the news? Actually in the Race?"

"The same. Who'd want it loud-haired that they're backing him? He'll certainly use a pseudo. Theba forbid that he should be disqualified. He's a likely winner."

Whitey got up and began pacing excitedly. He smacked a fist into his other palm. "By Tao, it could work!"

*By Tao, he says, Pransa thought. "By Tao," he never used to get that worked up. Always calm no matter what he was facing. I hope whatever we've gained has been worth what you're losing, Fidnij....*

"If there's a captain looking for crew ..." Whitey let the sentence hang.

"The two of you could maybe get off," Double-P nodded.

"We don't redshift without you," Pransa assured the slaves.

"Firm," Whitey said. "That's a jump we'll have to make when we come to it. But if people like the Sa'eed's can help, maybe some captain would be as willing. It's worth a try."

"Won't know till we look." Pransa said.

He nodded with decision. "Shall we report to Race HQ and see what's posted?"

"Let's." Pransa smiled at him. "Now aren't you glad I busted my butt to become a computrician?"

He grinned. "Pos! Three of you I could never smuggle offplanet!"

Not all the captains were in port yet, but there were three CREW WANTED postings. Pransa punched them up in turn on the Spacefarers' Aid terminal just outside Race headquarters.

"Ever heard of any of them?" she asked.

Whitey shook his head and studied the amber screen. "No way to tell much about experience, ship quality or anything from this. Sunmother, I can't even pronounce this first one! Look at all those words! Is that one person's name? What's that code there mean?" He poked a finger at a series of numbers.

"Don't know. Put in a query.

Whitey pushed the QUERY button and followed it by copying the series of digits. The answer came up: FIRST ONLY 2 YRS MIN

"That settles that," he said. "Only needs one member, a First."

"Which you could do, leaving you with three to smuggle, as you said."

He nodded. "Who's this next one, now... . A captain Emery. Needs three or four, report to—oh, forget it!" "What's wrong?"

"He/She/It's hiring through an agent. I do not like working for a captain who doesn't do business face to face."

"We can't afford to be choosy, Whitey."

"Maybe we can. There's still one name on the list."

"Outie name, too," Pransa said. "Gives me a good feeling, somehow. I mean Willie and Double-P are really the only Outies I've known...."

"Fine people, both," Whitey said, pushing buttons. "There are bad Outies like bad anybodyes, but I get that good feeling too.... Ah, look! Needs three crewmembers."

"Shall we check it out?"

"Firm. Absolutely. Copy down the hotel mod and let's go see this— ah —Kalahari Cuw!"

The woman standing in the door of the mod in a loose fitting mustard-colored jumpsuit looked to Whitey like anY" thing but a space captain. Not that there was any standard physical description of space captains. They came in all

sizes, shapes, colors, and sexes. Yet an experienced captain usually gave Whitey a particular feeling. A sense of confidence. This not-quite-but-almost-dumpy woman exuded, if anything, *timidity*. Whitey's hopes sank.

She was about his own height—short for a Galactic—with close-cropped white (!) hair, near-black skin (both of these dyejobs, on an Outie) and a lumpy figure belied by the angularity of her facial bones.

"We, ah—saw your *Crew Wanted* listing. We're without berths currently and, well, we'd like a chance at being in the Race, and. . ." Whitey spread his hands, feeling uncharacteristically awkward.

The woman said nothing. She merely stared at them as though amazed. Her attitude increased Whitey's discomfort.

"I'm an experienced First and Pransa here is a computrician. My name's Whitey. Uh, you *are* Kalahari Cuw — aren't you?"

She seemed to be shaking herself out of confusion. She stared at Pransa and stammered a bit, then smiled.

"Oh, pos, firm! Pos, I listed the ad. Um, come in, please." She stepped back to allow them to enter, and motioned them to chairs. She remained standing. "You'll have to forgive me. I was just not expecting—well, Aglayans."

Whitey's face tightened. "You have a problem with Aglayans?"

"No! Oh, great Theba, neg. It's not that at all. One of my best friends was—is—an Aglayan. That's the bigot's stock line, isn't it? It's true. . . and she looked amazingly like you, Pra—what was it?"

"Pransa."

"Pransa. She looked so much like you, Pransy, that for just a moment I thought ..." She seemed to have trouble speaking. Then "Excuse me. She . . . disappeared. My friends and I searched for her. Then I went to Terasaki to live and I just came out for the Race and I saw you and . . . Oh,

none of this sounds very glued, does it? Shifty furbaggin' way to start an interview!"

"It's all right," Pransa said, kindly. She *chermed* the woman's genuinely friendly attitude and was sure she spoke the truth about her Aglayan friend. Indeed, she seemed to feel something close to real affection for these two strangers.

*Just because we're Aglayans?* Pransa thought. *And ...could it be she feels something even more for me? I get the same reading from her! get from Double-P. Desire. Is this woman a crosser, too?*

"What became of your friend, do you think," Whitey asked. "Slavery?"

"Neg! Look, I don't know. Let's not talk about that. Uh ... suppose we redshift this furbaggin' place? These walls kinda close me in, y'know? Let's take a walk while we talk. We can see some of the carnival that way."

"Pository," Whitey said, rising. *A space captain who feels closed in by walls?!*

They walked. They watched merchants and hucksters and entertainers set up booths and stalls and equipment and portable sitters for the hyper-carnival that would accompany next week's Race. They talked. Whitey and Pransa described their qualifications, finding it necessary to lie but little, and that only where their slave raiding and Mindrunning was concerned.

Their prospective employer was more evasive, saying only that she'd had an extensive career in space. She supplied no particulars. Pransa *chermed* in her the confusing combination of growing affection for them accompanied by a reluctance of some sort.

*Reluctance to what? Be friends? Hire us on?*

*Or is it that she's attracted to me and sees how attached we two are? Could that be it? She foresees trouble from that?*

As if to firm this thought Kalahari turned smilingly to

Her . "I don't doubt that you're an excellent computician, Cloud-top, but—oh forgive the familiarity, please! I wasn't just giving you a nickname. It's a name I called my friend."

Whitey and Pransa exchanged looks. She wondered if he'd had the same thought as she.

Kalahari went on making feeble noises about being reluctant to take them on. Pransa hardly listened. She had just noticed that their strolling had brought them back into the neighborhood where they were staying.

"Look, Whitey, we're practically back to the house! Kalahari, why don't you come home with us and we can talk there? It's all right. There's a terrace out back if being cooped up bothers you."

Kalahari laughed nervously. "It wasn't that, really. A fine 'farer I'd be with claustrophobia! I just. . . I have a roommate who makes me nervous." *Who has eyes and ears that I'd just as soon be out of range of!*

"Ah!" Pransa said. "We have a couple of roommates too. They keep to themselves, though."

Kalahari looked genuinely grateful. "Firm, then. I'd like to sit down someplace other than that hotel. Can't relax there."

Pransa's ears caught a rumbling in the distance. A drop of water splatted against her nose.

"Rain coming up," she said.

"And it comes up fast around here," Whitey said. "C'mon, lets hurry."

They double-timed didn't down the street. Pransa noticed that Kalahari didn't run in a way that matched her dumpiness. She were kept right up with Pransa's Aglayan legs. Even so, they were all half-soaked by the time they entered the home of Modan and Khorana Sa'eed.

In the entryway \_ they all shook water from their hair. "I could use a towel or a blower or something," Kalahari said.

"Come on," Pransa said. "I'll show you to the sitter."

She led the way down a hall to a closed door. Standing aside, she gestured toward it and Kalahari reached for the seal. At that moment the door slid open and Spinner stepped out.

Clothed in a borrowed robe, the Jarp looked even more startled than Kalahari. Pransa was beyond startlement into near-panic.

"Oh ... Kalahari, this is Spinner—one of our—"

She was interrupted by the sound of another door's being opened. They all turned in the direction of the sound. The basement door slid to and Double-P stuck her head out.

"Spinner, you shouldn't be up—" The Outie saw the tableau and halted in confusion.

Confusion reigned everywhere—save on the face of Kalahari Cuw. Understanding showed there. She glanced back at the Jarp.

"Spinner, hm?" she said. "Jarp without a translahelm. That wouldn't actually be Sitspin, would it? And the woman—"

She turned back to the other open door.

Whitey stood next to it, hand hovering over his holster.

"Stay glued, jacko," Kalahari said. There was no mistaking the change in her voice. She sounded assured, calm— in command.

"You were going to say?" Whitey asked. His pale eyes resembled two chips of crystal quartz.

"I was going to *guess*," Kalahari said, "that the woman next to you is an Outie named Peeh. I watch the news, pos. I might also guess that three nights ago you two Aglayans were a different neutral color."

Whitey's hand closed on his stopper. He was certain he hadn't blinked. Yet before he could draw the weapon he was facing a leveled stopper in the hand of Kalahali Cuw. His lips Parted in shock.

"I used to keep this thing set on Three all the time,"

Kalahari said. "I also used to be much too ready to use it. So are you." She smiled, though the weapon never wavered. "I'm no threat to you. I've been where you are now. Wanted that is. And I've had good friends not only among Aglayans, but escaped slaves too. And Jarps. And Outies."

Double-P's eyebrows rose. She said nothing.

"So why don't you step out where I can see you," Kalahari said to Double-P. "That's right... hey, you're a lot cuter than my other Outie friend! *Course* he's a relative. Now: if you'll just undock from that thing, Whitey, I'll do likewise and we can all make nice again. Hm?"

Whitey cast a questioning look toward Pransa. She nodded. She *chermed* no hostility. Captain Cuw spoke the truth.

Whitey's hand left his stopper. Smoothly, without looking down, Kalahari slipped her own back into its holster. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Now," she said. "You were going to introduce me to this woman who I'll bet isn't an Outie anymore?"

"Firm," Pransa said. "This is, uh, this is Double-P. This is Captain Kalahari Cuw. We can trust her, Double- P... Spinner."

Kalahari's eyes softened in amusement. "Double-P! Enchanting. Would you like to join us while we talk a little business? I suspect you would have been a topic in the conversation anyway. Shall we go down into what I imagine is your little hidey-hole?"

She started for the cellar door. As she came up to Double- P and gestured her ahead, Pransa saw the look that passed between them. She *chermed* the feelings behind it as well.

*Well! Mutual attraction at first sight. Perhaps that solves our problem.*

It did not. Kalahari was all business now, although she maintained her friendly demeanor. She was a captain hiring a crew, and one question made it plain that that undertaking would not be transacted here today.

"Does either of you have spacefaring experience?" Kalahari addressed the inquiry to the two ex-slaves. She received two silent headshakes, and looked down at her lap, her own head shaking.

"It won't work," she said. "I know what you're looking to do and I wish you all success, but I can't help you. I'm in a position now where I— well, I just can't. I wish I could. Truly."

"We are sorry to have wasted your time," Whitey said.

"No waste," she said, and her eyes had gone cloudy. "I'm just sorry that it couldn't be. You people could be good friends, I think. Especially you, Cloud-top. Too bad you're obviously firm-docked. Double-P, now. ... maybe we'll see each other again sometime."

Double-P raised one corner of her mouth. "Back on Outreach."

The sardonic expression transferred itself to Kalahari's face. "Firm. On Outreach."

She turned to go, a dumpy woman who didn't move dumpy. At the bottom of the stairs she paused, looked back.

"A piece of advice from someone who's done *lots* of hiding," she said. "Never invite strangers anywhere near your bolthole. And another: don't assume that you're the only ones who are not what they appear to be."

She was gone

Whitey cast a tired look at Pransa. "Still amateurs, grunt?" - "Still amateurs," she said.

He smacked his knees with his palms. "Amateur enough to deal through an agent. Let's go check out Captain Emery .

The first thing confronting Kalahari as she entered her mod was a pair of endlessly long legs stretched horizontally between a unimorph chair and a hassock. At one extreme they ended in below-the-knee ebony equihyde boots. At the other they ended in Valustriana See.

"Been out?" the tall woman said.

"Smart question."

"Just an opener. Something to let you get in the door."

"There's more coming?" Kalahari started across the room to the wet bar.

"Pos, there is. This: sign them on if you think they'd be your best crew. Take the Outie too, if she'll make you happy and not interfere with your work. Take the Jarp, even! Passengers slow down groundcars, not spaceships. What TGO wants is to find out how you operate, in fact preferably with distractions. Find out if you've mellowed enough, Hellfire—or too much!"

Kalahari had spun about to face Valustriana upon hearing the first sentence. Now she reached behind her to clutch the bar for stability. Maybe for support.

"Stop shaking so, Cap'm Prass-top!" the TGO Agent said lazily. "It's my job to know what you do and how you do it. And with whom. That's what I do and how I do it. Oh, and by the way: because of that—I'm going with You. . . ."

Kalahari kept staring. She moved to a chair and dropped into it without looking down.

"Will—will they be safe?" she asked. "Or am I betraying them?"

Val flipped five, a look of disgust on her face. "TGO is not in the fugitive slave business. Well?"

"Well, what?"

Val pointed to a handcomm hanging by the bar. "Well, aren't you going to hire your crew before someone else does?"

Khorana Sa'eed took the call, covering the mouthpiece as she spoke to Whitey and Pransa. The pretty brown-haired woman looked alarmed.

"For either of you!" she said. "A Captain Q?"

Whitey looked startled but not at all apprehensive. He gave their hostess a reassuring smile and nod and took the instrument.

"Whitey oncomm.. Pos, Captain—Kalahari. Neg . . neg, we tried a Captain Emery but it was filled. You. . . what? And ... both? You're firm? Pos! Firm! Tomorrow, nine hundred hours, right... . Thank you!"

He offcommed and turned to Pransa.

"It appears we have a berth in the famous Five-Year Race," he said. "And ... we'll be taking two passengers!"

## 9

My conscience bath a thousand several tongues,  
And every tongue brings in a several tale,  
And every tale condemns me for a villain.

—Shakespeare, Richard III

It was tall even for a Jarp. Tall and muscular. Even those who said that all Jarps looked alike could see a difference here. It was often noted that Jarps' heart-shaped faces gave them a certain *sweet* look, to Galactics.

The Jarp called Hummer had the heart-shaped face, but no person in its right mind would have called it sweet.

Its naturally round eyes were flattened by years of scowling, its pursed lips turned down at the corners by a perpetual frown. Scars from numerous fights and accidents laced its face and bare shoulders. It wore no translahelm, having long since been implanted with the device enabling it to speak Erts ... in a carefully chosen, sepulchral basso. A calculatedly *villainous* sound. Its long wine-red hair was drawn into a single queue at the side of its head.

Leather straps held up a short, metal-studded halter coveting firm warheads. From it other straps depended, attaching at the waist to a kirtle of the same weather-stained brown leather. It ended above the knees. Just below them

began to twine the straps of sandal thongs that criss-crossed the Jarp's calves down to the foot coverings.

Hummer thought the garb was in keeping with its face, voice, and its image of itself. An image that coincided with the image others held of it. An honest image. Hummer thought the outfit made it look mean.

Everyone else agreed, although no one had ever said so to its face.

Hummer knew the value of effect. Its appearance was calculated because it suited Hummer's trade—its former trade. Until recently it had been first mate to one of the Galaxy's more renowned pirates, Captain Shieda. Before that, years ago, it had been a slave of fat Shieda of Balto. Taken by Shieda in a raid on Jarpi.

Hummer was one slave whose home planet had not been sorry to see it go. Even on early-steel-age Jarpi it had a reputation—for meanness, to put it politely and vaguely. For what Galactics called sadism. For outlawry. In fact, Hummer was wanted on Jarpi at the time it was taken. The authorities in its area (and quite a few outlying areas as well) realized that they had been mistaken; they hadn't wanted the renegade at all. They were much happier to have got rid of it!

Shieda had not gotten as far as he had by overlooking talent or reputation. He soon heard of Hummer's from other Jarp slaves. Soon Hummer was crewing for the slaver. Eventually it became Shieda's First and his most valuable assistant.

Until the bizarre incident that had seen the slaver kidnapped along with Captain Tachi of *Rambler* and forcibly transported halfway across the Hub and back by a rebellious Aglayan slave.\* (Rebellious and deranged. Hummer had seen the heretofore brave Shieda sent trembling and per-

• See Spaceways #15, Starship Sapphire

spiring from the ineffectual attacks on his mighty person by this one young but reckless-unto-mad young man.)

A slave! *Any slaver who lets himself be taken by a slave..* . Hummer thought, and left in disgust.

Now Hummer of Jarpi was looking for a berth, in the Five-Year Race if not something more permanent. After all, the crew of winners or even placers received *good* shares.

Meanwhile Hummer was unemployed. The years at Shieda's side had been well invested in terms of reputation. Hummer was nearly as well-known now throughout the Galaxy as it had been on Jarpi (and news on primitive Jarpi traveled slowly).

"Hummer?" the head of Koba District Security had said upon hearing who was waiting in her outer office. "Shieda's Jarp? Shaitan's cornhole, what does that thing want here? Don't we have a warrant out on it?"

"Neg. Major. I scanned, of course," the sergeant said. "Says it's looking for a job."

"A *job*? With *Security*? Doing *what*, does it suppose?" The brick-jawed woman sat back in her swivel chair, amazed.

"Hunting slaves, it says, ma'am."

"Tell it to get off Andor or it'll *be* a slave! Tell it—wait." Her face became thoughtful. "Hunting ...Tell it to come in...."

The sergeant saluted and left. A moment later she opened the door again and ushered in the biggest Jarp the major had ever seen. The tallest, the most muscular—and the ugliest.

It stood, silently. Staring. Finally the major spoke.

"The Hummer, I'm told One of the Galaxy's most wand slavers."

"Negatory, Major," a really impressively deep voice said. "I'm no slaver. I am a licensed first, unemployed at the moment. I'm also not wanted on Andor."

"Pos, well, I expect in one sense you're not wanted

anywhere," the major said, essaying a stiff smile at her own attempt at wit. It brought her only a flat stare. Nervously she shuffled a few puterfaxes on her desk, looking downward. Then she folded her hands and looked back to her visitor. Oh, how could a Jarp's eyes ever be so flat, so daunting!

Hummer waited just long enough to let the silence become uncomfortable.

"Someone *is* wanted on Andor, though, Major. Four someones, I believe. Two of those someones are fugitive slaves. There is no better tracker of such than I am."

The major sat back again, regaining wooden control of her face. "I thought that was what was on your mind. Why? Why should I use you? And why do you want to do it?"

Hummer relieved itself of an odd sound that might have been a laugh. "I have tracked slaves along the spaceways. These slaves are presumably still on Andor. I will go places your Seccers wouldn't even think of. I can do things your Seccers couldn't—or wouldn't dare—do. I can extract information that no traffic-watchers, with the possible exception of TGO, could extract. Why? Because it will pay me exceedingly well."

"You're asking me to appoint an extralegal vigilante. The other why."

Those daunting flattened-to-ovoid Jarp eyes stared into hers.

"Because it will pay *you* exceedingly well, Major. Because Jaranit Limited wants very much to capture whoever murdered that gamel's ass Warmaug."

"The slaves didn't do that. You understand we want the raiders much more than we do the slaves."

She stated the obvious, and the Jarp did not answer. Its briefest of nods bade her go on.

"And they could be offplanet already, since they likely look nothing at all like their descripts."

Hummer closed its eyes, shaking its head with deliberate certainty. "No odds. I know their type. Idealists. Another word for incompetents. They'll be with those slaves, trying to smuggle them out."

How do you know they're idealists? We've released only the scrute that the raid occurred and that two raiders were seen escaping on foot with two house slaves. The raiders could have been slavers themselves. Or someone with a grudge against Jaranit."

"I've already interviewed Taurence. He made it obvious that the raiders were freedom-mongers."

The major tapped her fingers speculatively. "It sounds as if you've already begun your. . . work."

"I had to wait to see you. It was a way to use the time." "Indeed," the major said. "You, ah—understand we would pay you by the job, not the time."

"The successfully completed job," the Jarp said in its flat bass straight out of a mausoleum.

"You also understand that you will carry no Sec ID, nor will there be any record of your working for us. If you fob it you're on your own. There will be no help for you."

Hummer said nothing. Again the tiny nod.

The major swallowed, nodded. "Well. On your way then. Good day, Hummer. Good luck."

The Jarp turned to leave. Before it could open the door the officer spoke again.

"Oh, and pos, Hummer—you *will* be paid exceedingly

The Jarp nodded one last time. "Good. You do understand that if I'm not—there will be no help for *you*?"

It disappeared smoothly out the door. The KobaSec major wiped sweat from her brow and reached for her desk drawer.

The job was much to Hummer's liking. The tracking it did alone, because that was the way it preferred to work.

Dealing with people was to Hummer's taste only if it were dominant over them, in control. This job held some of that aspect: pressuring informants, occasionally buying them (although that seemed distasteful, too much like asking rather than demanding).

Hummer chased rumors. It pursued likelihoods. How would one get from Jaranit Farms to Koba? Assuming one went to Koba. (Where else? It was the spaceport.) Grimly it prowled tunnels, confirming possible/probable escape routes. It interviewed farm workers who had known the slaves. From them it got names of musicians, art patrons, people who might welcome a visit from a Jarp who could talk Jarp culture. Hummer could, when necessary.

It asked questions. Of slaves. Of Seccers who had been on duty the night of the raid. Of children. The latter proved especially apt informants, willing to talk about strangers seen in neighborhoods. To some of these children Hummer was a friendly monster (Hummer could also act when necessary); to others a frightening bogey.

They had seen Jarps before, but not many. Never one like this.

It hired an artist, one who could work up a sketch from rough descriptions of a short white-haired man. ("An Aglayan?" the artist asked. "Probably," Hummer said.) Who could then superimpose a beard and scars and black hair on the portrait. Which could then be viewed by Jaranit Farms Ltd.'s major-domo for firming.

And now Hummer stood on the porch of a modest house in a suburb of Koba.

Khorana Sa'eed opened the door to see her doom standing tall before her.

She had never realized that such pain existed or could exist. She had heard stories, from Sitspin and other slaves. Horrifying as they had been, they were nowhere near reality.

Bent forward over the table to which it had strapped her, naked, Khorana groaned dully as the Jarp slammed against her buttocks in the last throes of its ecstasy. It pressed in hard, and the table actually slid a few sems along the floor. Then it sighed, relaxed, and pulled out of her.

The relief hardly registered. She felt the flow from her sodomized body and wondered if it were partly blood. The pain told her it must be. She didn't care.

It wasn't as bad as the pain that had come before. Jarps as a rule had smaller sexual organs than Galactics, because their bodies encompassed both male and female sets and there was only so much room. Hummer, however, was a big Jarp in all ways.

Still it wasn't as bad as that other pain. When he had thrust that *thing* into her. That ... tingler.

It was something else she'd heard of. A device for recalcitrant slaves. Or slaves who were to provide the entertainment of suffering for their masters. A tingler had ten graduated settings. The tenth produced pain almost beyond the capacity of the mind to register. To Khorana it felt as if a thousand razor-blades were trying to cut their way out of her body at once. White-hot razor blades. Twisting.

In a way it had been merciful. It had blanked her mind when she had badly needed it blanked. Her mind was functional again now, and she realized that she no longer cared what happened to her. The tingler did no permanent damage, but she knew such damage would come soon. She hadn't cared since the moment Hummer had killed her baby....

She had talked before that, too. Told it what it wanted to know. Told the Jarp who had been sheltered there, where they had gone (to stay with the captain who had hired them for the Race). Gave their names, their descripts, their plans. Their captain's name. She had to. The Jarp had used that thing, that tingler, on her child. She had talked, as fast as she could. She and Modan

Modan. The Jarp had raped him, too. Not as a male rapes a male. The Jarp sought satisfaction for both its sexes. It had held Modan down, straddled him, forced him into itself. Worked itself up and down, powerfully, brutally. Fondled him. Held him. *Squeezed* him at last, with those huge six-fingered hands. And squeezed and squeezed. . . .

Was Modan dead? Would it kill them all?

*Of course it will.* It had killed the baby, the baby, right in his floater crib. They were witnesses. They could warn the fugitives. It would kill them. She didn't care. Not with the child gone. *Now* was only a dullness, almost a numbness.

It had killed the infant mercifully fast, for some reason. It would not do so with his parents.

She grunted in reflex as those big hands unstrapped her and turned her face upright on the table. Through unfocusable eyes she saw orange fingers holding what looked like a knife, moving past her face, down. .

A vibro-knife.

Khorana didn't care.

But oh, Booda—the *pain*. . .

## 10

And say my glory was I had such friends.

—William Butler Yeats

The dagger thunked as its blade sank into the wood of the ocher-leafed japyrain tree, then quivered subsonically. Its blurred outline became swiftly clearer. The vibration ceased.

Whitey strode over and pulled it from the wood. Another chip of bark fell to join the heap on the ground.

As he turned he saw Pransa watching him. She had evidently just emerged from the Hotel Koba Central's rear door and was walking across the empty lot toward him.

The day was hot. Arkimedes blazed blue above. Whitey wiped sweat from his head with his right sleeve. The dagger flashed ice-blue in the light of the hot blue sun.

"Practicing again?" Pransa said as she neared him.

"Every day, Pransa," he said. "It's a skill I should keep up. I've neglected it of late."

"Not the last few days you haven't. Really, how often does knife-throwing come in handy?"

He shrugged. "Rarely. It's part of the training. I should be practicing my fighting skills, actually. For that I need a partner."

"Could I help? You'd have to teach me. Don't know how good I'd be, but at least I could give you a workout."

"That would be good! Thank you, Pransa. We can practice onboard during the Race."

She put her head on one side, her hair azure-highlighted under this sun.

"Won't we be awfully busy?" she asked.

"At times. The Race is like any other space flit. Takes weeks. Most of that is dead time, waiting time, in conversion. Flitting through space, twiddling your thumbs." "Must be especially hard on Jarps! So. We can pass the time at knife practice. Doing what we always have."

"Grunt?"

"Slicing."

"Oh. Terrible," he said, grimacing.

"Making love, then." She smiled softly. "Slicing is what other people do. Less fortunate people." She put her arms around his neck. Leaning forward, she kissed him lightly. He responded and it had begun to be something more than light when ...

"Mm," she said, breaking away. "Speaking of terrible, what's that racket?"

"Sounds like yelling. Neg; laughing. Loud. Coming from that window--"

"That's our mod, I mean Kalahari's," Pransa said. "She having a party?"

"Somebody's up there," Whitey said tightly. "Doesn't seem advisable, with our two fugitives inside. Can you *cherm* anything?"

Like any Aglayan woman's, Pransa's ability to *cherm* emotions from an individual was effective only at a few meters. That range was extended when powerful shared emotions emanated from a crowd or mob.

"Pos ... it must be laughter. Good feelings. Friendship."

"Hey, Pransyyy!" The voice of their captain drifted down.

"Whitey! Redshift up here and meet some people!"

They looked at each other in surprise. Whitey melded

his dagger to the chest of his tunic and they went in.

Kalahari stood surrounded by what seemed a whole mob of people. In truth there were only four, but they were doing enough back-slapping and chortling for a convention.

Two of the strangers were Jarps. Another was an Outie, a man (*Dam' goodlooking!* Pransa thought). The fourth was a woman with skin blacker than Pransa and Whitey had ever seen—with the possible exception of Dorjan's—and canary yellow hair.

The oddest thing of all was that all except one of the Jarps wore identical clothing: red jumpsuits with dangling black sashes.

On a couch in the corner, looking nervous, sat Double-P and Spinner.

Kalahari noticed the newcomers. "Hey, it's all right! I've been trying to tell these two fraggy fugitives here it's all right. Help me, willya?"

"/s it all right?" Whitey asked.

Kalahari crossed the room to him. She put a hand on his shoulder.

"These are my friends," she said softly. "You four are my friends too. I wouldn't do anything to risk your safety. Believe me, you are safer *with* these people knowing about you than not! If you ever need assistance you couldn't do better than—" (here she swept her arm toward the room in a grand gesture) "—the Samna Coalition!"

The two Aglayans looked blank.

"A business organization, really," Kalahari said. "It includes me. We're just a bit—*dramatic* about it. Whitey, Pransa—this is Captain Quindarissa of *Sunmother*. And Trafalgar Cuw, guess where he's from, and Cinnabar neJarPi, guess where *it's* from. This orange person in mufti here is Sweetface, our valued associate. Damn but I'm excited!"

Three of the newly-introduced people nodded toward the

Aglayans. The one called Trafalgar Cuw made a sweeping bow, broad-brimmed hat in hand, reached out and took Pransa's hand (which she surrendered in bewilderment-- and amusement) and actually kissed it.

"I see what you mean, Kali," he said\_ "She does bring back memories."

"Memories ... ?" Pransa said.

"Of the friend I've told you about, Pransy," Kalahari said. "My —our—Aglayan friend. She's of the Coalition too. Owns the ship, in fact."

"*Sunmother*, you said," Whitey said.

"Good name for an Aglayan's ship, right?" Kalahari said. "Enough of this standing around, though. It's reunion time! Let's get drunk."

They did, foregoing antinebri pills for awhile. Long enough for the two Aglayans to become comfortable with these people and for the two freed slaves to relax. Trafalgar became involved in talking over their home planet with Double-P while Cinnabar seemed decidedly attracted to Spinner.

After a few drinks Kalahari jumped up and whooped everyone to silence. "This is ridiculous! We can't stay in here turning gray when there's a carnival outside. It's Race week, people. Let's go out and take in the action!"

"Sounds right to me," Trafalgar said, hoisting his glass to her and slopping a little over the rim. He grabbed his hat in one hand and Double-P's arm with the other.

"We—can't, Trafalgar," Double-P said.

"Oh shit," Kalahari said. "I'm sorry, you two. It slipped my furbaggin' mind. Listen, we'll stay here with you—,"

"Neg," Double-P said. "You go. There's no reason for everyone to stay cooped up."

„Besides," Cinnabar said, its arm around the shoulders of Spinner who kept glancing coyly at the other Jarp, going to pass. "I'll keep these two company."

Double-P grinned wryly. "I expect that means I'll be talking to myself. But the rest of you go. Really! We're fine."

They went, not at all reluctantly. A block's walk brought them downtown and into the heart of the hyper-carnival.

"Really it's a series of festivals, all sorts of celebrations in town for the Race," Kalahari said. "I came once when I was a little girl."

"You're not that big now, sister-woman, though you hide it well," Trafalgar said. Kalahari aimed a swipe at his head, laughing.

Pransa felt at ease. She *chermed* more good feelings from this group than she could remember since leaving her village on Aglaya.

The streets were madness. A multicolored maelstrom. The slidewalks had been turned off, having become meaningless beneath the swarming feet. Eddies of people swirled everywhere, flowing into and out of each other till it seemed impossible that any coherent activities could be taking place. Blazing costumes from every planet of the Galaxy moved up and down and across the walks on (or mostly off) people of all colors and sizes. Small booths harbored hawkers who touted more goods than Pransa knew existed. Cyberbarkers importuned the throngs to enter "tents" formed of opaque flowfields to view sideshows, wonders, freaks (one claimed, ridiculously, to have a Shirashite inside), holos, pornographic exhibitions. Musicians abounded although when walking halfway between one group and another it was impossible to recognize any of the sounds as music.

"Oh, Spinner ought to see this!" Pransa said, stopping in front of a man with prass-colored skin and long green hair.

Out of his mouth protruded five long and intricately carved pipes, four of which were supported on a stand reaching to the ground. The fifth he held, his fingers dancing

over its fingerholes. The four drones let out a pathetic lachrymose wail below the tootling of the melody.

A sign on the stand billed the fellow as THE HUMAN BAGPIPE.

"How does he do that?" Pransa screamed over the din.

"Genengineered circular breathing," Trafalgar howled back.

"Heard something like it on Panish once," Sweetface said as they sauntered out of range of the clamor. "In a zoo. Bull jemelephant masturbating."

Quindy elbowed the Jarp. "Sweetface —turn off your dam' translator!"

"Look there!" Kalahari said, pointing. "The Akima Mars Festival!"

"The what?"

"It's been on all the holos this week. Big celebration for her. She's a native Andran, y'know. From right here in Koba. They're having marathon showings of all the Setsuyo Puma mellers."

"They'll have marathon lines at the joyhouses then," Whitey said. "What's all that commotion out front?"

A huge throng of screaming people waving what appeared to be cards clogged the entranceway of the holo theater that bore the AKIMA MARS FEST sign.

"I dunno," Trafalgar said. "That looks like ID paper they've got. You know, the kind they use for prints?"

"It is," Kalahari said. "They're after her thumbprints."

"You mean Akima Mars herself is over there?" Trafalgar said incredulously. "All one hundred thirty-four double-E sems of her?"

"Firm," Kalahari said. "Homecoming as well as festival."

"Sweet Theba! Must be about the only two planet-sized and definitely heavenly bodies in the Galaxy I haven't seen! Hoy, Sweetface, Whitey—hoist me up!" He craned his neck

over the heads of the crowd, attempting to gain height by will power alone.

"Actually I wouldn't mind a glimpse myself," Sweetface said.

"Oh, me too," Kalahari said "But not at the price of threading that crush."

"Come on, Traf," Quindy said, tugging him away. "More than a double handful's a waste anyhow."

"Did you see anything?" Sweetface asked.

"Maybe, well it's hard to be sure, can't we go back? I swear I saw *something* big back there!"

"Oh, well, if it was just *one* something big it wasn't Setsuyo!"

"You'll have to settle for lesser attractions, Trafalgar," Kalahari said. "There's a personal appearance by Yemutha Valvalex tomorrow."

At this Pransa burst into laughter. The silent Whitey turned as red as only a pallid Aglayan could.

"What's that all about?" Kalahari asked.

"Oh . . . Whitey had rather a personal encounter— Whitey *was* Yemutha Valvalex once," Pransa answered.

Trafalgar Cuw raised his eyebrows so that he looked just ridiculously, incredibly ingenuous. He said, "Grunt?"

"We were crewing for a weird woman named Khorundah, trying to free a—friend of ours from slavery. My former Promised, actually. On Crystal. Whitey used an aurasuit—"

"Advanced," Sweetface said. "This Khorundah had one, hmm?"

"Several," Whitey said. "Khorundah was as great a, mystery as I've seen. So was her technology. Pransa

"Anyway," Pransa went on, ignoring him, "Whitey got the wrong program. He turned into a perfect replica of Yemutha — nude! He and

"Willie?" Trafalgar said.

They paused while a drum-beating local pranced by, wearing ... paint.

"Former crewmate of ours," Whitey said. "Wildorado Jee."

"Willie and Whitey—" Pransa began.

"Willie Jeer Trafalgar cried. "Where is she?"

"Khorundah killed her," Whitey answered, his eyes looking into some other place.

Trafalgar Cuw turned away. He seemed suddenly interested in the fringes of the crowd.

"Did you find this Promised of yours, Pransa?" Kalahari asked.

"Pos. He, uh ... by that time he had gone pretty fraggy. It's a long story. He's in a psychmed facility on Barbro now."\*

Kalahari turned to her with a look of pained sympathy.

"Oh, Janjy, I'm sorry," she said.

Pransa's reaction was sudden and violent. She stopped and whirled to face the other woman. Her face flushed angrily. One hand hovered near her holster. The other reached out and gripped Kalahari's arm.

*Oh boy, what's this?* Trafalgar thought, tensing. He and Sweetface and Quindy held their own hands loose and ready. They spread out, surrounding the two women who were now oblivious to them. Trafalgar noticed that Whitey had gone similarly alert. *Careful, Pransa, you don't know who you're pushing,* Trafalgar thought.

"Janjy?" Pransa said. Her voice was frigid.

"What?" Kalahari said confusedly. "Janjy? Did I. I'm sorry, I called you Janjy! Janja was my friend's name, the one I told you we'd been searching for. I. . . my hair. ..." She touched her short, Aglayan-blond hair.

"Kalahari," Whitey said evenly, his glance shifting from

\* See Spaceways #15, Starship Sapphire

one woman's face to the other's. "Janja's the sister of Pransa's Promised. We were looking for her, too!"

"Oh, Theba!" Trafalgar said. "Now just wait a min, hover easy. We are Janja's friends, Pransa. I assume you are too?"

Pransa's face softened a bit. "Pos. I just—I can't believe it...."

"Believe it," Quindy said. "Your Janja is a member of the Coalition."

(A drunken Jarp in a wolf's head mask jostled them, staggered, and lurched away.)

"We heard that she had become wealthy," Whitey said. "We also found out that Khorundah was tracking her—" "Khorundah?" Trafalgar said. "Why?" Without so much as a sideward glance, he pushed away a blowzy woman with a shrill noisemaker.

"We never knew precisely, except that she wanted revenge on her for some reason."

"Revenge ... ? Oh sweet Musla!" Trafalgar said.

"Traf. . . . ?" Quindy gazed in concern at his shocked face.

"Corundum," he said. "Khorundah, Corundum. Talk about transparent! Janja was for awhile the ... consort of the pirate Corundum.\* You may have heard of him—"

"Firm, of course," Whitey said. "Who has not?"

"I have not," Pransa said. "Janja? With a pirate?" She twitched irritably as an openly fondling couple sauntered past, wearing bright orange hair and matching body suits.

"Until she left him and he was forced to go City by the slaver Jonuta—whom Janja later killed," Trafalgar said.\*\*

Pransa shook her head, her face pained. "Can all this be? Janja? Janja of Aglaya?"

"Can and is, Pransy," Kalahari said softly, reaching out to the other woman. "Sounds like this Khorundah, if she

\* See Spaceways #2, Corundum's Woman

\*\* See Spaceways #6, Purrfect Plunder

really was Corundum, blamed Janja for his—her?-----troubles. Trafalgar, this is fraggy! How can Corundum be a woman?"

"It's not unprecedented, Kali. Can be done surgically, of course. There's also at least one case on record where someone went City and returned with gender reversed."\*

"Wouldn't that have been big news?" Whitey asked.

"Pos. If they let it." Trafalgar shrugged.

"Where did you hear of it, Traf?" Quindy asked. "Ow!" She whirled and threw a wild punch at the grinning Jarp who had pinched her in passing.

"Ran into it in a membank someplace, darlin'," he said, smiling.

"I think I'm carnavaled out, people," Kalahari said. "The *noise* is curling my toes. Could we go back to my place? Your place? Anyplace? I need ... something!"

They went, and told each other long stories that only a few strong drinks rendered believable.

Six spidery orange fingers danced over the buttons of the Spacers' Friend console at Race HQ. White letters splattered across the amber viewscreen. Hummer contemplated the list Of CREW WANTED notices.

Even as it looked at the first—a Captain Emery's—more letters appeared, spelling Out FILLED; LSTG WTHDRWN

*Agented anyway, the big Jarp thought. Well, there's that Outie captain—neg, that's been filled too. What's this? Must be new, or else I missed it last time. You're getting careless, Hummer! Let's see .. Don Arcibo what is all that? It's name? Seeking—a first! Vla!*

Hummer reread the entry and noted the berth. It turned from the console. Two spacefarers who had been standing in line behind it started to move forward. With an after-

\* See Spaceways #11, The Iceworld Connection

thought Hummer reached a long arm back and wiped the screen, then logged off the console.

"Hoy, jacko!" one of the 'farers said, a short Terasak built like a bull. "The slice y'doin'?"

"Position's filled," Hummer said, turning away again.

"Slice it is. You just looked at it. We get a scan too."

"Pos," the other man said. "You flainin' fruitskins think you're as good as Galactics just 'cause you got two more thumbs to diddle your own icing with. Oughta give you a separate line. You and the sunflowers." Both men chuckled.

Hummer listened to this with its back turned. Then it turned to face the two, shrugging.

"The ad was for *a* first, not *two* bigots. But..."

The Jarp extended a hand toward the keyboard without showing a hint of its real intent. The two 'farers never even saw the change of direction. Of a sudden the bull-bodied one received a slap under the chin, not hard; insulting. His head went back in surprise and his arms flew out to his sides in a moment's confusion.

The follow-up blow from the Jarp's stiff-fingered other hand hit hard, right in the crotch.

As the bull went down the other 'farer, nearly as tall as Hummer but without its reach, just had time to see an orange arm flash toward him over his descending partner's head. Then he felt six fingers digging into his windpipe and jaw. Hummer pulled the man forward by the neck. The off-balance spacefarer doubled over at right angles to the sidestepping Jarp, whose muscular leg sprang up to knee him in the solar plexus. The fellow went down with a "Hoogh!", and stayed there, huddled next to the bull.

Race HQ. stepped over the tall man, nodded pleasantly to the wide-eyed woman next in line, and unhurriedly departed Race HQ.



"The scan is that it was done by the Jarp Hummer. It's been seen around town, asking questions.'

Whitey rubbed his eyes with his fingers and slumped farther into his chair. For a time the only sound was of Spinner sobbing softly in a corner.

Then Whitey's muffled voice came: "Shieda's Jarp?"

"Firm," Double-P said. "Not with him anymore. It's been known to take on fugitive slave-chasing jobs before."

Whitey raised reddened eyes from behind his hand. They remained dim though his jaw stayed firm.

"How were they killed?" he asked quietly.

Double-P looked uncomfortable. "You—you'll hear it on the vid. I'd rather not repeat it. It was . . . bad."

"The baby too?" Pransa asked weakly, yet with untrembling voice.

"Pos."

"Can the nippers do nothing about this?" Whitey asked.

"Hummer's probly working for the nippers, Whitey," Double-P answered. "Taurence wouldn't front an outside spook. Not his style. In any case the policers wouldn't interfere with a fugitive hunter."

"What kind of person is this Hummer?" Pransa asked, her tone incredulous.

Spinner spoke softly in its native language. The sounds were so low and sweet that they seemed incongruous in such a conversation.

"Spinner asks that I tell you what I tried to once before," Double-P said. "As we left the tunnels that day."

Pransa's brows knitted, then smoothed. "Oh. Its story, you said. I remember you were reluctant, Spinner."

The Jarp flipped its fingers, sagged, faced the floor between its knees.

"Spinner was taken off Jarpi by a slaver, I told you

Double-P said. "That aver was Shieda. Hummer—a no-

torious criminal on Jarpi, who had disappeared in a raid the previous year—was now working for Shieda.

paused, let out an audible breath. "It—takes a mean Jarp to rape another Jarp. Hummer prefers it that way. Later both Spinner and I were sexually used by Jaranit. Used and, in Spinner's case, abused. None of that was as bad as what Hummer did to Spinner."

Whitey stood and crossed the room to stand by Spinner. He touched the seated Jarp on the shoulder.

"We will find this one, my friend, and it will pay. For the Sa'eds and for you. It will pay."

"Whitey. . ." Pransa said.

"I know. We have seen Khorundah, and Krontij, and even Shieda. We have seen hate and obsession with revenge all along the Spaceways. Now I am promising revenge. I, a pilgrim of the Tao. Vengeance would never have occurred to me a short while ago. Killing human garbage out of necessity to save Janja in Dringle Pie Boulevard—yes. That was before I began to follow Tachi's philosophy. It had more than a little to do with my conversion, in fact."

"That hardly seemed a non-interfering act," Pransa said, looking at his taut-clenched jaw.

"It was an act of necessity. That was how I saw the Tao at first. Resist not. Flow with events. I flowed not with the Tao but with the ways of Galactics. Out of necessity. A willow."

"A willow?"

"It is said that the willow bends in the face of the storm and thereby survives. The oak resists and is broken. I am a coper—a survivor. So is Spinner. So are we all. The Sa'eds were oaks, sheltering the willows."

"And you would have us become oaks now," Pransa asked, "and face this storm? This renegade Jarp?"

"I im I would have us become the storm." Whitey's face became impatient. He flipped five. "I'm speaking too much

like my old self, sheltering action with words. This Hummer is a sickofobber. Cess that must be Poofed."

"Hummer is also a coper, Whitey," Double-P said. -A survivor who knows when to bend and when to resist."

"Uh. It also has a weakness," Whitey said. "It likes to hurt, even when that is unnecessary. Three shaders in Dringle Pie Boulevard had that problem: This Hummer shall join them to face Sunmother's reckoning!"

## 11

Good breeding consists in concealing how much we think of ourselves and how little we think of the other person.

—Samuel L. Clemens

"You know who I am then, Hummer?"

The tall thin man in black taffetas lit another narcostick without offering one to his guest. Clamping the holder between his teeth, he crossed his legs and looked up at the tall Jarp who stood before him.

"As you know who I am," the Jarp said. "We are both in the same business and we are both very good at it. Reputations are like ships' signatures. I read them quite well, Don Arecibo —Manjanungo."

The slaver captain smiled thinly. Lifting one hand from the great carven arm of his throne-like chair, he snapped his fingers. To his right, clattering bead curtains parted to admit a girl (definitely not yet a woman) attired in filmy hip-hung blousars and nothing else. Gathered at the ankles and just above the pubic bone, the voluminous pants seemed to defy gravity, revealing a belly so flat as to be nearly concave. They were so sheer that they served little purpose as covering. Hummer knew the pants were designed only to enhance what they revealed.

The slave girl knelt at the throne's side. Her breasts

depended toward the floor as she bowed her scarved head. Manjanungo reached out and stroked the back of that head.

"Look around you, Hummer. This is the cabin of a captain. A successful captain. A well-bred captain."

*A conceited grickhead*, Hummer thought. *Absurd posturer!*

"You are successful in your way, Hummer. A captain you are not. We know each other by reputation. Never think that that makes us equals in any way. I demand deference from my employees. Respect." He gazed coolly at the other, his eyebrows elevated in a way that he must know was supercilious.

*Worship*, Hummer thought disgustedly.

"I didn't become one of the best firsts along the spaceways by not knowing my place, Captain," it said.

Manjanungo nodded. "And you are one of the best, Hummer. Truth to tell, you wasted yourself with that swine Shieda. I'd be pleased to have you at my side for the Race. After that—we'll see!"

"Thank you, Cap'm Manjanungo. As soon as I finish this slave-catch—"

"Ah, about that, Hummer ... you work for me now. When you work for Manjanungo your business is Manjanungo's. Manjanungo's business in the Tr-System Accord is in the ascendant. The Race will secure that business the preeminence it deserves. If I come back not only the winner but in possession of the famous slave raiders who murdered the honorable Warmaug Jaranit—well! You can see the boost it would give me among my customers."

"You are saying ... ?"

"That I will capture these fugitives. That is, the credit for their capture will be mine, although your skill and experience will be invaluable. I will do my best to value them, however, with the aforementioned generous shares. I am a

fair man. Whatever fat fee you are no doubt expecting to collect from KobaSec will of course be yours as well."

Hummer's face remained impassive. "I—see," it said.

"Of course you do. Oh, I'm not trying to humiliate you, Hummer. Just to make certain that you know your place. I'm sure you do or you wouldn't have gotten as good as you are. I demand a little more than most, however. If I tell my people to bow, I expect them to bow. Or whatever else I ask. Firm?"

"Firm, sir."

Good." Manjanungo tapped the ash from his redstick, drew on it again, let the smoke out slowly while directing that supercilious stare at the Jarp. "Bow."

Hummer bowed. Unhesitatingly. Unselfconsciously.

"That came easily, I know, Hummer. A person in your position must needs be a good dissembler. You're a coper. A climber. You feel no resentment when you have to scrape. It's a tool you use. You'll be a captain one day, Hummer, though not of this ship."

"Of course not, Captain."

"Um. Of course you resent my. . . cavalier way with your fugitives. But you can't do anything about it. Don't worry. I know you very well. I know what you like. You'll get it. I will take credit for the capture—and you can have the fugitives."

"Sir?"

"To take out your resentment on! The instructions were 'dead or alive,' were they not? Have all the fun you like with them! It'll keep you from being unreasonably angry with me. You see, Hummer—I give my people what they like. What they need."

"Hummer's in the Race," Pransa said.

Whitey whirled on her. "What?"

"It's posted as first mate for this Don Arcibo whatever-his-names-are."

"Can it have lost our trail?" Whitey shook his head. "Neg, that's silly. If the Race postings are up, our names are there as Kalahari's crew. Hummer certainly knows them."

"Maybe it's just switched jobs," she suggested.

"From what I've heard I doubt it. Hummer's obsessive. It always completes a job. That's part of its business credentials."

"Could it be planning to make a try for us during the Race?"

"Possible." Whitey nodded slowly. "That works both ways. We know where Hummer will be now, and where it will be returning."

"Will we be returning? I thought we were trying to get offplanet."

"We are signed on as crew, to do a job," he said. "We are duty bound to do it. If Kalahari wins or places we should have no trouble leaving here again as crew. If not, well . . . at least we can transfer Double-P and Spinner offship somewhere. To Rambler, I hope. I gather Tachi must be clear with the other slaves, somehow. I've heard nothing on the news about their being recovered."

"Kalahari is amenable to this?"

"She is. I suggested putting them off during the trials, but that follows a fixed course, no deviations allowed. She has no objections to an attempt to offload during the Race, when there's more leeway."

"She's an amazing person," Pransa said. "There's some sort of fire under that soft exterior."

Whitey sighed. "Like the rest of us—she may not be exactly what she seems or claims, eh?"

## 12

You know my methods. Apply them.

—S. Holmes, detective

He too serves a certain purpose who only stands and cheers.

—Henry Adams

"I don't know whether the crowds are biggest around the betting terminals or the giant holos," Kalahari said.

"They're queuing up to bet already?" Whitey asked.

"Firm. Betting's heavy even on the heats. Better odds. Some people come to watch a Race, others to get rich by it "

"Have you bet any, Captain?" Pransa asked. "I heard the other members of your Coalition say they had."

"I . . . no. My cred's tied up just now. Besides, how could I bet against my own partners? Or for them and against us? I tell you, going against Quindy is the only thing that bothers me about this!"

"Afraid she might resent it?" Whitey asked.

"Neg! 'Afraid' that she'll win!"

Her crew grinned. The three of them sat oncon in Kalahari's ship, *Disc & Bud*. The name had been suggested by Pransa. When she explained that it was a reference to the symbols of Tribemother's authority on Aglaya, Kalahari

had accepted it at once. "In honor of Janja." And Kalahari had touched her cropped, dyed hair.

Now they were checking out the ship's latest installation: the holo connections that would broadcast exterior views from *Disc & Bud* to receivers throughout the Galaxy during the heats and (the crew fervently hoped) the Race. Broadcast stations had been set up at probable conversion points along the route as well. The fixed route of the trials made the heats more predictable visually than the free-style Race proper. Hence the heats were exceedingly popular with the Race fans.

"Where is our long tall second?" Pransa asked.

"Val?" Kalahari said. "She'll be along. Off on some errand of her own. She's an independent sort."

"Uh—about her, Captain. . ."

"Swallow it, Whitey," Kalahari said. "She is a more than competent spacefarer and you'll have no troubles with her. Remember *you're* here for reasons other than appear on the surface."

"Of course, Cap'm," Whitey said. "Firm."

He looked at the lean, slight body of his captain. A far jump from the dumpy person they had signed with! She wore her Satana Coalition jumpsuit now, its skintight lines making it de-al- that this bony, angular woman was neither soft nor overweight. Nor buxom; that former bustline had been part of whatever image she chose to project planetside. She was actually as close to bosomless as Whitey had ever seen.

*Just being onboard seems to have changed her whole character as well as her looks, he thought. She has command in her. I can work with a captain like this.*

Kalahari was running her fingers over the console of S1PACUM. The Big Screen lit up along with a series O1 scan-winkers. A spacescape of the planet Andor appeared

above which *Disc & Bud* orbited nose down, attached to Kobastation.

Kalahari toed on the outship comm. "Overlook Central, this is *Disc & Bud*. We have clear view. Do you firm? Over."

*"Overlook here, Disc & Bud. Receiving a fine holo. Readouts all firm. We think you're set, Captain Cuw."*

"Thanks, Central. Don't forget to bet on us in tomorrow's heat."

*"Well, uh—"*

"Pos, I know, we're up against this Don Airsole or whoever he is and you've put it all on him. Well, we just may surprise you, jacko! Out."

As it happened, *Disc & Bud* surprised no one save her own crew. They had been unprepared for such superior ship-handling on the part of Kalahari Cuw. She lost her heat to Don Arcibo, but still finished in the top ten.

Which was all there would be in the Race: ten ships.

Ten starships to cut across parsecs of Galactic space along a path roughly the width of a small star system. Ten ships to make their way from T-SA 'way out around Barbro Transfer Station and back, piloted by the astrogational skills of their captains without programmed course cassettes. Ten spacers free to choose their own courses and points of conversion, so long as they lay within the prescribed limits.

If Kalahari's ship proved to be swift but unsurprising, others of the eventual ten finalists did indeed startle the fans. The mysterious Captain Emery, who had made no public appearance that anyone knew of, placed. So did a complete dark horse named *Starsucker*.

Dark horses were not unusual in the Five-Year Race. Kalahari was one. Captain Emery might be, although it speculation as to its identity ran rampant. (Six-to-one said it was Kisiar Jonuta of Qalara going incognito out of embarrass-

ment at what had happened to him recently at Jasbirstation\_ where someone had blown out a chunk of *Coronet's* hull to escape the proud Captain Cautious.\*) A young unknown named Chane of *Windrammer*, already a crowd favorite through holo interviews, was another.

*Starsucker* was something else again. It came in a bare tenth, squeezing out three competitors all of whom fell behind with mechanical trouble. Such breakdowns were not unheard-of, but three together, running neck-and-neck for tenth place ... ?

Then there was the definitely unheard-of youth of *Starsucker's* captain and crew. This Ulf, while personable and intelligent, seemed hardly a grown, man. And the spacer itself was a point of speculation. Some noted that it bore an uncanny resemblance to Captain Vettering's *Golden Porkchop*. (And where was the uncouth but heavy-betting Vettering this year anyway? He was a great Race fan, though never a participant.)

All these things were interesting, though hardly shocking, surprises.

Then there was *Sunmother*.

"Captain who?" "What's her name?" "This is that Quindarissa person?" Race fans at holo screens all over the T- SA and indeed the Galaxy were astonished at what they were seeing courtesy of laser-carried tachyon broadcasting.

Hardly less so were the members of *Sunmother's* crew.

"SPTC\* in exactly nine-point-GAHLGGG . . . !" Trafalgar said as his stomach lurched upward. As it settled into its normal position again he opened his mouth carefully, for fear that other than words might escape. "How did you *do* that? We could have all been Cited!"

"Nah," Quindy said. "I just popped us in a fraction ahead

\* See Spareways #17, The Carnadyne Horde

\* SafePoint for Tachyon Conversion

so our momentum brought us to the edge of safe point as conversion became complete, rather than well into the point. Saves time. Time is distance, you know."

"What I told you, Trafalgar," Sweetface said. "She anticipates SIPACUM. Knew the readout before it was complete, hit the button. A few secs, a few million kloms ahead."

"Can't cut any corners on this prescribed course," Quindy said. "Gotta simply *go faster*. That means get going at trans-light — get converted—sooner than anyone else." She shrugged. "Seems obvious."

"Everything's obvious except how you did it, darlin'," Trafalgar said, and reached out to give her a touch. "What if those numbers SIPACUM was putting out hadn't been—"

"They were. I knew they had to be. I can't tell you how, Traf. I just . . . know. They seem right."

"Lord, lord and my grandfather's ghost!" Trafalgar said

"Better get used to it," Sweetface said. "There are more jumps on a short tight course like this than a long haul. And they're all close to planetside, triple-looping around T-SA—"

"Please try not to use that word *looping*," Trafalgar said. "Somehow it puts my innards on uneasy ground."

Cinnabar's voice came over the inship comm from its station aft. "*Nice going, Captain Quindy ma'am. Is it against the regs for crew to call in bets during the Race? I want to up mine!*"

"Your bungle, Cinnabar," Trafalgar said. "You should

have done like ol' Trafalgar. I left standing orders to up my bets every time the odds changed. And you can bet they changed just now!"

They had. Bets were being increased all over the System. The fans had a new hero in Quindarissa. Never had they seen such daringly successful ship-handling. Many missed some of her best maneuvers simply because they were away from their screens at the time; they couldn't believe that return of signal with return to "normal" space was possible

so soon. Then some diehard would come running from a public screen, shouting, "Hoy! Kaufmann's Planet just popped in from *Sunmother's* TPs!" and fans would run into the bars and public viewing areas. Soon they learned to arrive early when expecting *Sunmother's* adverts. When it was out of conversion they stayed raptly before the screens unless they remembered a sudden errand at the betting terminal.

They were rewarded. *Sunmother* placed first overall and became the favorite to win the Five-Year Race. Many fans, not to mention members of the Satana Coalition, went to bed richer the night the last ships came home from their trials.

Quindarissa was now the captain to beat. The fans knew that. The crew of *Sunmother* knew that, jubilantly.

And the other captains knew that. . . .

"Race Inspector," the small man said to Quindy, presenting his credentials. "Checking to see that all equipment is regulation."

"Again?" Quindy sighed. "We had one yesterday. "There's always the chance someone shifted some cassettes onboard since then, Captain, so we double-scan. First inspector mighta missed something."

"Uh. Come onboard. I'm going with you though—to make sure you don't forget anything. I'd rather not have to be awakened the night before the Race because you want to do this again."

She stood aside from the hatchway of *Sunmother* at the ship's end of the umbilical tunnel that connected the craft with Kobastation.

The visit to Kalahari had been Quindy's only ground leave in many jumps. After the publicity of being merely an entrant—let alone the favorite—she had decided to forgo another leave and stay onboard while the rest of the crew

went planetside. It was her custom in any case. The threatened attention had simply made the choice easier.

Now she showed her unwelcome visitor around the ship. He poked under consoles, ran routines on SIPACUM made systems checks, ticked off lists of spare parts. Finally he asked that *Sunmother's* captain open the service panel of the main drive.

Quindy impatiently popped the stasis locks and removed the panel. The inspector bent his head into the opening and began to examine the works.

"Sorry we hafta do this," he said, his voice echoing hollowly from within. "Had a captain try to sneak in his own modified gas-filter correlation radiometer one year. Strictly non-reg."

"I don't see what difference it makes what equipment's in the double-p," Quindy said. "Sublight is sublight. It's the converters that count."

"Well—mmph—you know how, ahh, sticky regs can be, Captain. Hm. Shoot me that spot-torch from my kit, will you? Thanks.... Where's your ion flow safety discharge?"

"Top right. Haven't you ever seen an lhke housing before?"

"Oh, pos. Not too many. Advanced!"

"Pos. Good ship we've got." Quindy tapped a foot in boredom.

"There, now just hand me—" the inspector began, swinging an arm toward the opening from within. He broke off as his wrist hit the edge of the housing wall. A short sharp tinkle sounded from just within the housing.

"What the vug was that?" Quindy asked.

"Oh, what a grunje!" The man stuck his head out of the Opening. "Broke the crystal on my wristchron.

"Real glass?" Quindy turned to look.

"Firm. Present from my mother."

"Oh for ... look at this! It's all over the lubeslot! You want to grind up my drive? Slok!"

He looked nicely contrite. "Sall right. Slot's closed. Gimme my hand vac and I'll clean it up for you."

"You'd better." Quindy handed him the device.

He disappeared inside with it. Faint humming came from within, followed by rattles as the glass was sucked up into the collection chamber. At last the inspector emerged.

"Clean ship, in all senses," he said with a smile. "Sorry to have troubled you, Captain."

She flipped her fingers. "Have to do your job, I guess. Sorry about your chron."

He smiled again. "Just the glass. Runs fine. Thanks."

"Firm. Now go put *Disc & Bud* through maneuvers. Careful you don't foul any of Captain Cuw's compartments! She's touchy."

"Uh, pos, Captain, right. I will be careful, firm."

She led the small man to the navel tunnel and saw him out of sight. She returned to the con-cabin to continue her own systems checks for the Great Race.

Out of sight around a bend of Kobastation's docking wheel, the inspector was met by a long-legged hazel-haired woman—girl—in a yellow ultrann skinnTite. Pure sex, and flaunting. Her eyes were bright, very bright.

"Do you have to wear that thing?" the inspector asked as he began peeling ultralateX from his face. "It reminds me of Nevermind."

"The jacko on the holonews likes it," she said. "Good for our image, he told me." She struck a pose, inflating her chest and holding her breath.

"Our image should be a little fainter right now. Show off after we win the Race." He tugged at his forelock, breaking the clinging field of his wig. He lifted it off and folded it into a go-bag at his waist.

"This outfit was good enough to get you that ID, remember."

"That chulwar would have corked you if you'd come after him in a spacesuit. Never saw such a horny flainer!"

"Thanks," she said drily. "How'd it go?"

"Smooth as, uh, permalube. 'Cept I thought she'd take my balls off about the glass. Never saw me slip the Cryton Strain into the lubeslot. Did you slap the lamprey on Captain Chane's *Windrammer*?"

"Pos. Seems a waste, though. He's only ninth-rated." "We're tenth, if you'll recall," he said.

"This Don What's-his-butt is second, "the too-sexy girl 4 said. "Shouldn't we've used the lamprey on him?"

"Don't worry. I have something planned for that fop. First I have to use this ID once more before the charm wears off. True God but you're a sexy cake in that thing!"

"Save it, luv," she said, backing a pace. "Where this time?"

"Race headquarters."

"Oh, *Ulf*..."

The youth flipped his fingers. "Security's loose. We want the edge on all these pilots. Studying their styles isn't enough. I've seen them at work. SIPACUM hasn't. We're going to educate it.

"How?"

HQ confiscates all entrants' course guidance cassettes, firm? They've got ours—half of which are Vettenng's. At least they have one copy. I don't trust Vett's very far any- lway. So—we're going to use someone else's. Quindarissa's, I think, or maybe the Don's. Maybe both."

"You're going to steal cassettes?" she asked. incredu-

"Neg. Never steal anything rare, Alianora. The crime is inevitably discovered and the criminal becomes a center of

attention. Much easier to get away with something if nobody knows it's even been done. I'm just going to copy the cassettes."

It was a bold plan, a good one—and not really all that risky. Copying could be done near-instantaneously with a beltstik-sized bulk copier. Too, Ulf was right about security. It was light, designed mainly to keep out Race participants who might try to regain their cassettes. Ostensibly this was to keep them from being used in the Race. True enough; yet there was another, unpublicized reason. TGO also copied the racers' cassettes. TransGalactic Order depended for its effectiveness upon having the advantage along the spaceways, where many highly skilled and highly independent ships' masters came and went more or less at will. One way of gaining that advantage was to recruit the best of those captains for TGO service. Some of the best. Those who were controllable, one way or another.

Another way was to recruit those captains' skills in the form of their personal knowledge of the spaceways. their guidance cassettes. In many ways this was better, since the captains had no knowledge that their secrets—and nav cassettes were prized and guarded secrets—had been tapped. A ship's master such as Quindarissa might or might not prove useful to TGO. The Gray Organization would not know until after the Race—and a bit of personal inquiry.

Meanwhile there was no doubt that her personally-prepared computerized guides to the Galaxy would be valuable.

Ulf of Nevermind had come to the same conclusion. Unfortunately for him he acted upon it too late. He was right about security: It *had* been light. It no longer was.

"They wanted palmprints as well as ID," he told Alladora. "I had to redshift *fast*—and outmaneuver two guards just to get clear. Hid in a public sitter."

"Why? Why the extra Security?"

He fondled her yellow-sheathed breast with youthful callousness. "The scrute is that it's this Captain Emery. Nobody's even seen the flainer, Ali! I talked to another inspector out on the docks. He still bought my ID. Said they'd been onboard to search Emery's ship and found no one there. Nobody's seen Emery coming or going. So later they get a call from onboard, and it's Emery! So they look again. No Emery."

"So Koba Sec gets nervous," Alianora said

"Koba, your cute ass!" Ulf said. "TGW!"

"TGW is guarding Race headquarters?"

"Firm. The big boys 'n' girls, for some reason."

Alianora sat back and let her breath out loudly. "So now what?"

"So now we fall back on a third possibility. Sabotage is best 'cause it's sure. Cassettes are next best. Give you an edge that nobody knows about. Don Arcibo and a couple of others—including maybe this Emery weirdo—we're going to have to *lean* on a little, inflight."

"You mean attack them during the Racer Alianora's eyes had gone all bright again. Bonnie had never looked at her Clyde with more delight.

"Not *attack*. Nudge. Crowd. Things that could be laid to our inexperience. Don Arcibo, for instance. He's as daring as Quindarissa and he's got a better ship. A yacht! She's the more skillful but then we've already got an advantage on her. Arcibo will be taking chances. It'd hardly be our fault if he risked a little too much, out near the collapstars. Got in our way, you know?

"In other words, Ali—a little old-fashioned spacehogging!"

## 13

Practical politics consists in ignoring facts.

—Henry Adams

There is always someone worse off than you.

—Aesop

Only the wealthy or powerful were privileged to view the start of the Five-Year Race, live. At that the powerful had to offer rather than demand favors.

TGO profited from both groups. It was not ungrateful. The wealthy and powerful shuttled in luxury to Kobastation, where, well-fed, they were seated comfortably before giant viewports. They watched the ten ships set off on the first leg of the Race.

Ten *colorful* ships. These ten cred-producers all had sponsors now, some of the Galaxy's great corporations. Making it through trials to the Race proper effectively canceled out all entry fees and expenses besides earning gratuities in the form of more-than-adequate stocks of 'whatever product the company was pushing.

In return, the ships were repainted in company colors, both for advertising purposes and to add to the spectacle the event.

The first ship leaving was also the most elaborately, if

not gaudily, painted. Captain Ulf's *Starsucker* wore a complex plaid pattern, an old Homeworld design called Kynncayde, the emblem of RobCo, manufacturers of bolos, synthers, and all manner of entertainment complexes. The squares of green crossed by lines of black and red were the talk of the aficionados.

Being first to set out, *Starsucker* received more attention than it would later. Its onboard telepresences would give viewers their initial look at the "school course," the first leg of the Race.

Like the trial heats, the school course consisted of a required (but different) route through the T-SA. Following it came the main part of the Race: a free-style path along a broad corridor out to Barbro Transfer Station (where still more privileged viewers would be waiting) and back. The distance from T-SA to Barbro was about two-thirds of the distance across the Galactic hub. For an average freighter the round trip would be a matter of a few months. For these racing captains that became weeks.

There were guidelines. The prescribed corridor must be adhered to, since all commercial traffic could be rerouted but not halted entirely. The corridor's width was that of a large star system—in fact very near the breadth of T-SA. It encompassed certain tests of skill—a euphemism for dangers and obstacles. The Maelstrom, the huge collapstar at the core of the Galaxy, lay within it. At its far end out near the Caniadyne Void lurked the twin collapstars Skylla and Karybdis. The racers would have to thread their way between those two monsters before swerving sharply for Barbro.

No ship must come closer to an inhabited planet than the orbit of its inmost moon. If that moon was inhabited, then the next out was the boundary. No ship must seek help from a space station of a craft not in the Race. (It was hardly expected that any would ask aid of a competitor.)

In addition to cassettes, CAGSVICs were prohibited. Any of the voice-actuated computers onboard a participating craft had been disconnected and locked by Race inspectors.

For some contestants all this might prove moot, as they would have no chance of placing after completing the school course. In some years as many as three entrants fell so far behind during the local leg that they didn't bother to continue. Occasionally an overeager captain had been known to push through the System so hard that the ship's drive burned out or otherwise failed.

This year only one spacer would not complete the school course.

As *Starsucker* pulled away from the vicinity of Andor, the ninth-rated *Windrammer* came up to starting position. (Participants began in reverse order of placing.) Chane's vessel glowed in stripes of red, green, and yellow in token of its sponsor HosMouCo, which had saturated the holos all week with assurances that *Windrammer* carried no beverages onboard save Lanatian Cherry and Limon pop.

("What a ghastly price to pay for sponsorship!" Trafalgar Cuw muttered.)

*Windrammer* gave way to the next ship in order, and the next. So they passed, each garnering cheers from bettors and intense comment from fans generally. They reserved their lowest-keyed talk for the mysterious Captain Emery's ship, identified only by numbers. Emery had refused sponsorship and the spacer's color was its normal midnight blue with one huge star-shaped white highlight.

For this entrant, boos mingled with the cheers. Speculative mutterings outnumbered both.

Don Arcibo's showily sleek *Ruy Diaz* elicited a round of spontaneous applause from watchers throughout the galaxy, wherever they stesd fro watchers throughout the before their screens. A beautiful yacht made more so by its tasteful striping of mauve and beige melting softly into each other, courtesy of Hojatocorp,

it was still the favorite. Even those who bet against the Don appreciated his ship.

Kalahari Cuw's *Disc & Bud* took unofficial honors for Most Garish, with no contest. It had an Aglayan name but an Outreacher sponsor: Frag-Gear Unlimited, makers of raiment for spacefarers. The paint job could not truly be called a pattern since its use of seemingly every conceivable color left no room for repetition.

Last of all came *Sunmother*.

Both its captain and its colors had been under wraps all week. Its sponsor, TMSMCo, had gone to great expense to shield the ship from the view of the curious. The company colors were no secret, but keeping the full effect hidden until the outset of the Race had been a daring commercial ploy. Now aficionados gasped as the graceful diamond-flake glo-azure hull slid into view.

TMSMCo had guessed aright: heady enthusiasm produced by the moment upped bets still further.

No one was prepared, however, for *Sunmother's* making the most dramatic start ever seen in the Five-Year Race. The sparkling sky-hued ship ignited and slid out of Andorian space as had all the rest. Then, just crossing the orbit of Andor's Powersat 1, a good twenty minutes sooner than anyone (racer or otherwise) had ever dared, *Sunmother* popped into tachyon conversion and disappeared from viewscreens.

"Musla's mother!" Trafalgar said, with a hand on his lurching stomach. "If this doesn't send 'em redshifting to the betting terminals. . . !"

"They'll be laying bets whether we accidentally went City or not," Cinnabar said. "Really, Quindy, that one surpassed your own best. At this rate we'll be out of T-SA in five days."

"Three," Quindy said, "or I'm doing something wrong..."

Trafalgar and Cinnabar looked at each other, and swallowed.

"This is just mumsy stuff anyway," Quindy said. "The real fun starts when we go free-style."

"Think you can recall most of your cassettes, Quin?" Trafalgar asked.

"Not even gonna try. I've never attempted to run most of this route at top speed anyway, although I have scraped around the Maelstrom before. I've got some whole new ideas."

"Oh wonderful," Trafalgar said.

"I can hardly wait," Cinnabar said. "I wish I'd left my stomach back at HQ with the cassettes."

Three days, and *Sunmother* emerged from the school course. It had started last; it began the freestyle portion in first position.

Not far behind came Don Arecibo. Kalahari held fourth place and Ulf fifth—with no help from dirty tricks. He learned fast, and what he had learned from Quindy and Manjanungo was Daring. His reckless conversions would have terrified his crew halfway to mutiny had he let any lack of confidence show. He did not. That was another lesson he had learned early.

After an unspectacular but workmanlike piece of piloting, the phantom Captain Emery's GMIDUF2 exited the Tri-System Accord in last place. Ninth.

The Race no longer had a tenth entrant.

"Did you hear about *Windrammer*, Captain?" Whitey asked.

"*Windrammer*!" Kalahari answered. "I've heard enough about that ship and its dam' cherry pop to last two lifetimes. I hear the Kosmic Klown Khorus singing in my sleep: Lah-nuh-tee-un Chair-y, the 'farer's ree-leeef. . . ' What about it?"

"*Windrammer*'s out of the Race. Didn't even finish school."

"What the vug happened?"

"Breakdown or equipment failure of some kind. The news is incomplete. The impression I got was that their SIPACUM was fobbied somehow."

"Impossible," Kalahari said. "A SIPACUM in thumbsup condition, running a near-space course? How? Drive, maybe. You must be mistaken. How could he slice up his SIPACUM?"

"Computer traumatizer, sir. Bonded itself to *Windrammer's* hull and gorged SIPACUM with false scrute. Captain Chane couldn't tell which end was up and so—"

*"Dammit, Lemble, I know how a lamprey works!"* the voice from the comm said impatiently. *"I want to know how it got there."*

"Looks like sabotage, sir," the harried Lemble said. Even though his superior could not see him as he spoke into his wrist comm he held his trim body unconsciously erect. He had never had to report to anyone at this level before.

*"Sabotage,"* the comm voice said drily. *"Grabbles, Lemble, I was sure Captain Chane must have put it on his own ship."*

Lemble closed his eyes in self-disgust. "Sorry, sir. Just a little nervous, I guess."

*"Stop calling me 'sir' and use the code name you were told. Whoever told you I was a 'sir' anyway? My voice could be scrambled. If you're going to assume things, Agent, at least don't let on what you assume."*

"Pository, ah, Cougar. I, um, it must have been one of the other entrants who used the lamprey on—"

*"There you go again,"* the voice called Cougar said.

"Pos, Cougar. Sorry again. Shall we investigate at this end and try to stop whoever did it before they can hit anyone else?"

*"Pos, neg, and it's too late."*

"Grunt?"

*"Yes you should investigate. No you shouldn't stop whoever did it. And they've probably already hit other ships. That lamprey almost certainly was put on before the Race."*

"Firm, Cougar. Of course. But. . . why shouldn't we stop the perpetrators? Once we identify them, that is."

*"TGO is in this Race to find superior space captains, Lemble. If someone is successfully sabotaging 'em, TGO would like to see more of the saboteur's capabilities. On the other hand, it might hurt the Race's image if things get too out of hand. You'll keep me informed."*

"Double-pos! Very good."

*"Very bad. But we make the most of it. Do you have any scrute on this Emery yet?"*

"Negatory. Emery's currently in last place."

*"All right. Keep on that, too. Go get yourself a drink, Lemble. You're sweating. Cougar out."*

"Lemble—out...." he said, realizing that he was speaking into a dead comm. He wiped his brow with a shaking hand. He *was* sweating, all over. He had the unsettling sensation that whoever-the-vug "Cougar" was, he could see every drop.

The crew of spaceship *Sunmother* stared grimly at the spacescape on the Big Screen. Rather they stared at the lack of anything perceptible in space. At the great dark nothingness called the Maelstrom.

They shared the sight, through *Sunmother's* Race telepresence cams, with half the population of the Galaxy.

The Maelstrom had nearly a palpable presence although no part of that presence was visible. A gigantic extinctiodn that held light hostage to the lives of spacefarers who dare venture too near the event horizon of the Galaxy's biggest collapstar.

"I hope you're not thinking of converting this near that devil," Trafalgar said.

"That would give the fans a thrill, wouldn't it?" Cinnabar said. "They wouldn't know if we'd converted or been sucked in."

"Don't worry, kiddies," Quindy said, her gaze welded to the screen. "I may seem reckless but I'm not fraggy. I'm going counterclockwise around it."

"You're a liar," Trafalgar said.

"Why should I lie about that?"

"Not about that, Quin. About not being fraggy."

"That is the longer route," Cinnabar said. "Exposes us for a greater time."

"Why do you think I'm doing it?" Quindy asked. "Everybody whips around the Maelstrom to gather sublight speed from its gravity. So do we—only we go the long way. More pull, more speed, farther ahead when we convert again."

"Sweetface, are you hearing this?" Trafalgar asked.

"Pos," the Jarp's voice said over the inship comm. "At least we won't have to go quite so near the thing to gather speed. If we took the normal route Quindy'd be hugging it."

Silence. Trafalgar turned to his captain. Then he said, "Uh, the look on the captain's face says 'Guess again,' Sweetface. I have a feeling she's gonna try to kiss that monster."

*"Vla! Another new experience for a spacefarer, firm?"*

"Firm, and here—we—go!" Trafalgar said as the ship's acceleration began to build.

To other incredulous 'farers they later swore that they could *feel* the insidious tug of the Maelstrom's monster of a magnetic field. Trafalgar was sure of one thing he felt as they arced around that cosmological anomaly: the aching of his jaw.

*Musla! Grinding my teeth? Time for a refresher course*

*inSelf-Calming Technique or whatever they're calling it these days. Hell, I should've just taken a repsonall*

They'd all been around the Maelstrom before. None of them had ever been around it with a captain who didn't even turn her head when the DANGER light flashed crimson, warning them of the imminence of capture by inescapable force.

"Quin—" Trafalgar began.

"That's Danger, not Disaster," she answered tightly. "We've got leeway yet."

Trafalgar and Cinnabar looked at each other. The Jarp shrugged. They turned back to watch helplessly. *Sunmother* was in Quindy's hands and there was no one in the Galaxy who could pull it out if she miscalculated.

She didn't. Trafalgar was certain he heard his muscles cracking when at last he sat back and let out his breath. He hardly had time to draw another when

"We've lucked out on a safepoint, chilluns," Quindy said. "Stand by for conversion in—now!"

"Oh, wonderf—" Trafalgar broke off with bile pushing at his throat as *Sunmother* and its occupants became tachyon replicas of themselves and vanished from "normal" space.

Race fans marked their chrons and jotted down another new record. They wondered if it might be the last one this incredible captain would ever set. Having converted that close to the Maelstrom the possibility always existed that reconversion would never take place . . .

That possibility seemed confirmed when the outside time limit for reconversion came and went and *Sunmother* had not been heard from.

"The second-, third-, and fourth-placers have all popped back in for the jaunt past Nevermind," a Race fan in Han,, s New York Bar in Raunch, capital of Thebanis, said.

"I tell you, *Sunmother's* gone City," a fan in the Ocean

Room on Barbro Transfer Station said. "We'll never see it again."

"It was a dam' fool thing to do," a fan wearing a Franjese suit said in the Mine Shaft Bar on Windbreak. "She was good but reckless, y know?"

"I don't know a traffic controller in Norcross on Qalara said as he punched a citation into an aircar driver's computer. "This Quindy's surprised us before. Give her time."

"Flainin' scut!" an angry patron in the String of Pearls husthouse on Franji said. "I already paid! You can't just jump out from under me and—"

But the hust was gone. She had grabbed a robe and hurried out the door on the trail of another woman who had burst in and announced that *Sunmother* had just popped back into existence—in the vicinity of Franji!

Where it had no business being.

Excitement spread not only among fans but among the other entrants. The crew of *Disc & Bud*, just past Nevermind and headed out toward Front, tried to make sense of the maneuver.

"Bungle! Have you ever seen anything like that?" Kalahari asked of no one in particular.

"I agree it's impressive and spectacular, Captain," First mate Whitey said. "But what good is it going to do her? She's far off course."

"It's a mistake," Valustriana See said from behind his chair. (*Disc & Bud's* cabin, equipped with the standard three chairs, forced the tall second mate to stand when all three of the others were on duty.) "Her SIPACUM must be fob-, bided. Either that or she just doesn't know what she's doing.

"Val, the day that woman doesn't know what she's doing," Kalahari said, "you can also stop believing in gravity and the collection of duties."

"You put a lot of faith in her," Valustriana said.

"I put no faith at all in anything: I observe facts and come to conclusions. Fact: Quindanssa is the best darn' space pilot in the Galaxy.

"And your conclusion, Captain?"

"My conclusion is that she knows what she's doing and anyone with any brains and enough guts will follow her. Which, being nearly at SPTC, is what we're going to do."

"What?" Val said. "Cuw, you can't risk this ship—"

"Captain, the Race course?" Whitey interrupted. *What kind of second speaks to her captain in such a manner? Who is this ...person?*

"She's within the course," Kalahari said. "The corridor reaches just to the near side of Franji, and that's where she is.

"For what reason?" Whitey asked.

"No good reason that I can see," Val said. "You should stay on course through—"

"Valustriana See, *you* are the one who's off course!" Kalahari said, turning in her seat to face the tall woman. "I am master of this ship and I decide our course. You *are* here to observe how I do that, I believe?"

Whitey and Pransa exchanged puzzled looks.

"Firm," Val said quietly. "At least you haven't lost any of your accustomed *Holy Theba*—"

She was cut off by the lurch in ship and stomach as Kalahari turned and slapped the button that threw *Disc & Bud* into conversion. Nearly losing her footing, the very tall woman from Outreach gripped the back of Whitey's chair. He felt her long ebony hair on the back of his head as she doubled over to gain control of her innards. His own stomach leaped, then settled.

"You kids handled that pretty well," Kalahari said admiringly. "In fact you've weathered all our jumps as well as anyone I've seen, including Quindy."

Whitey and Pransa smiled at each other. Both had the

same thought and both knew it: even such impulsive jumps as that last were tame compared to the lunacy of conversion onboard Khorundah's Sapphire.

"We've—experienced worse," Whitey said to the captain.

"And I've experienced worse crew," Kalahari said, smiling at him. "You two are good. How'm I doing, Valustriana?"

"You're doing fine ... for a follower."

Kalahari's face went stiff. She stared rigidly at SIPACUM's display board and did not reply.

Whitey broke the cool silence. "Captain, perhaps I had best see to our two passengers. They have *not* been handling conversion well. I expect that last may have—rather upset them. . . ."

"I think they've settled into a state of continuous nausea," Pransa said. "That last may not have been that bad by contrast!"

Kalahari nodded. Whitey rose and left the cabin as Val moved to replace him at the con.

As he sortabounced down the corridor he again wondered who this person was who was obviously onboard *not* simply to be second mate.

"It's a long flainin' ways just to avoid Shadow," Ulf said.

"I thought you were taking your cues from Quindarissa," Alianora said.

"For her and Kalahari Cuw that jump was a calculated risk. For us it would be suicide. I can't pull off a conversion like that. The line between daring and recklessness is skill. Mine isn't quite up to that."

"Then we fall farther behind."

"Neg," Ulf said. "We move up one place."

"How?" Alianora asked.

"With the help of that brown star. It orbits Shapley outside Front's orbit. Shadow's the main obstacle in the approach to Skylla and Karybdis. Sometimes it's out of that approach. They schedule the Race to coincide with the point in Shadow's orbit that has it smack in the way. No straight line even approximately possible. If you're good enough you can pick up some speed from it. It's so damned hard to find, though. Nearly invisible."

"You're going to try to gather speed swinging around it?" Alianora asked.

"Neg again. I've been searching for something easier to find—that jacko who's in third place, just ahead. Kantilal in *Zenana Lady*. I put its signatures into SIPACUM during the heat. If we stay to its portside we'll avoid Shadow."

"We can overtake him before he reaches it, according to SIPACUM. If we make a short jump."

Ulf nodded. "We always could. I've been holding back till we could use it."

"That won't keep us ahead, though. If he's on the inside he'll get more pull out of the star."

"Not if he's too far inside. Then he'll just get pulled *into* the star."

Alianora flipped her hair back and stared at the boy. She nodded. Her eyes had brightened.

"I see," she said. "We move up one place by eliminating one place. Can we do it?"

"If we couldn't I wouldn't try. We can come out right beside him and cut across his bow. It'll take careful plotting. We'll be coming out of conversion blind. You'll have to get me his probable coordinates from his current speed and vector and the estimated increase and change due to the star. Can you do it?"

"I can ask SIPACUM the right question," she said. "Of course if Kantilal varies his plan while we're in conversion . . ."

"We could lose him entirely. Or come out right on top of him."

"Chances, chances," she said smiling.

Ulf smiled back. Then he returned his gaze to the console.

"Stand by for conversion," he said, "in three-point-eight mins!"

A brown star. A misnamed astronomical entity: not brown and not a star. Dim of albedo though not totally invisible, hence "brown" to distinguish it from black holes, collapstars that truly were lightless. Nearly star-sized yet not a star, nor yet a planet either. A potential star that had failed to ignite.

Such bodies served mainly as hazards to navigation.

Still, a good captain could use one as a sling to gain momentum when traveling in sublight mode. Prathnoo Kantilal was such a captain. An unspectacular but skilled pilot who had worked his way into the Race through long hard years of experience, he had no charisma and a loyal coterie of adherents. He was an honest merchanter known for workmanlike shiphandling and little risk-taking. Using the brown star Shadow as a sling was the closest he'd ever come to daring in a life whose first voyage had come at age six.

He was on his last voyage now.

The maneuver he was undertaking made him nervous enough. When the other spacer popped out of conversion less than three kloms off *Zenana Lady's* portside, Kantilal came near panic. He kept presence of mind enough to hit the warning signals in case the other captain didn't realize its mistake—and the proximity of another ship.

The captain of *Starsucker* knew precisely what he was doing.

Kantilal rarely made errors. But Kantilal had never worked this close to the edge before. His alarm sounded in his voice as he frantically messaged the other ship.

No reply came.

anomaly detector as it warned of the increasing pull of Shadow. They watched the other spacer unbelievably move *toward Zenana Lady*. It closed the distance between the two ships at an acceleratMg rate. Instinctively Kantilal took evasive action, putting SIPACUM on Manual-andContinue, moving "upward" and attempting to accelerate. He could not. Shadow was already providing all the acceleration possible.

Now the plaid spacer moved upward also, matching *Lady's* course. It also accelerated, putting it just ahead of Kantilal's ship.

Then slowly, carefully, *Starsucker* began to swerve. Its bow cut inward on a line to put it across *Zenana Lady's* path. Reflexively Kantilal turned with it. It was the right response—had he been in deep space. He was not. He was in the neighborhood of a brown star. The near neighborhood.

The mate realized first, and yelled. Kantilal's head snapped around and he saw the deadly figures prancing across the sendisp's uncaring face. For a second, two, three at most, Kantilal juggled the two simultaneous threats in his mind. Commendably fast responses for any space captain. Commendably fast—and uselessly slow.

By the time he hit the maneuvering rockets to bring his ship back around, the issue was nearly settled. It needed one more mistake to end the matter. Kantilal made it. He cut velocity.

His mind told him that this would pull him back farther behind his attacker (for such it was, he finally acknowledged someplace in his unconscious) and give him room to maneuver out from behind it. Such a maneuver was no longer possible.

A principle of orbital mechanics known since the early days of space travel said: "To speed up, slowdown." An

orbiting object—which was what a spaceship using the sling effect was, temporarily—moved more slowly the higher the orbit. And vice-versa. If it decelerated, however, it lost altitude. Being in a lower orbit, it then sped up.

Velocity was not an issue for *Zenana Lady*. The lower orbit was. *Lady* now moved below the point where its power would enable it to escape Shadow's gravitational pull. It was trapped, and its fate was ordained.

Eight ships now remained in the Great Race.

*Starsucker's* SIPACUM knew it. It told Captain Ulf that Kantilal's craft had passed the point of no return. He ordered SIPACUM to take evasive action, pulling *Starsucker* away from the deadly gravity well that was now only one klom away from being a trap for his own ship.

Ponderously *Starsucker* lumbered out of the brown freak's vicinity.

No need to stay to observe (through sensors) the final resolution of *Zenana Lady's* agony. The figures couldn't lie. The matter was settled. Whether Kantilal chose to jam- cram under the worst possible conditions, or to continue the futile struggle to break free with a double-p drive inadequate to achieve orbital velocity from too low a height ... he was done.

Thus *Starsucker* was well past Murph on its way to Skylla and Karybdis when *Zenana Lady* broke up in the upper gaseous envelope of the brown star called Shadow.

14

The one means that wins the easiest victory over reason:  
terror and force.

--A. Hitler, loser

"What in Theba's name is that?" Trafalgar asked.

He expected no answer. He had no reason to suppose that any other spacefarer of his acquaintance could identify the hollow booming noises emanating from somewhere deep in *Sunmother's* aft end. Or the rolling vibrations that accompanied them. They resembled nothing that Trafalgar had ever experienced before.

"Fobs me," Sweetface said. "SIPACUM should know . neg. No indications whatever—wait!"

A cobalt blue scan-winker had lit up at the top of the console. Simultaneously the booming began to slow and lower in pitch and the vibration turned to a diminishing shudder.

"SIPACUM's shut down the drive!" Sweetface said.

"What?" Trafalgar said, looking in disbelief at the console. "Why? What's the damage?" He scanned the board, searching in vain for some indication of the trouble that would cause the computer to override its living masters.

The con-cabin door slid open and Quindy entered. "What the vug's going on?"

"SIPACUM's shut us down," Trafalgar said. "No explanation."

As he spoke he rose hurriedly from the captain's chair to allow Quindy to take his place. She wore only gentian bandeau and shorts, but Trafalgar spared not a moment for his usual admiring glances. They were in serious trouble even if the mechanical problem proved minor. In a Race and no longer accelerating. Coasting, they would be so long reaching a safeport for conversion that their eventual arrival at that point wouldn't matter.

Quindy fingered buttons lightly, deftly, querying the computer. At last she elicited the information that the drive was in danger of seizing up, although no actual damage had (yet) occurred.

"That's a relief," Sweetface said.

"Still doesn't tell us why—or get the show back on the trail," Quindy said. "Ever seen anything like this before?"

"Once," the Jarp answered. "*Coronet* had a lube leak due to a meteoroid hit and we lost most of our permalube. SIPACUM reported the leak instantly, though."

Already Quindy was querying for leaks. Negative.

"That would seem unlikely on *Sunmother*," Trafalgar said. "It's got a backup with force-feed. We'd have had an leak indication that it was online. Take a mighty humongous leak to drain both.

"Damn!" Quindy said. She hit the inship comm.  
"Cinnabar

A moment passed during which Quindy drummed her fingers on the console impatiently. Then the other Jarp's voice sounded:

"Captain?"

"Go back to the drive housing and check the lubeslot. Neq, wipe that. Pull the main bung and check the well. The reserve, too."

"Right."

The comm went silent. Quindy settled back to wait, chewing edgily on the side of a forefinger.

After an unhopeful time the comm came alive and Cinnabar's implanted voice, reverberant, came out: -

*"Captain Quindy, I'm down in the housing\_."*

"Firm," Quindy said shortly. "And?"

*"And there is no lube, Cap' m! A little residue on the sides of the feed tubes. That's it. The backup as well."*

"No lube? Have you gone fraggy?"

*"No, Captain, I haven't. I'm just telling you—"*

"Firm, Cinnabar. Sorry. Blueshift forward."

*"Ignited."*

Quindy off-commed. She turned to her other two crew-members.

"Well?" she said.

"Well," Sweetface began, "it's easy to see why SIPACUM was so laconic about it. The only thing that's supposed to be able to happen to permalube is leaks. No leaks, no report. There is no winker to indicate *Permalube Mysteriously Disappeared*. I've never heard of its happening with integrity unimpaired."

"So where'd it go?" Trafalgar asked. "The converter? It didn't convert back from tachyons last jump?"

"Pretty selective," Quindy said. "Neg. It's gotta be something we don't know about, something—"

An eye-eez pink light flashed on SIPACUM. "Intership, Trafalgar said. He knew a hint of *deja vu*. *If Tura ak Saiping's out there to rescue us, I'd like to be taken to the nearest planet and institutionalized*. He hit the multi-directional pickup-and-sender. The mainscreen came alive with a view of a ship. A gaudily multihued vessel, ten kloins off and matching *Sunmother's* speed.

"Riot in a paint factory!" Trafalgar winced and smiled "It's Kalahari."

Kalahari's voice filled the cabin accompanied by her face on the screen. *"Quin? Why are you dead in the ether?"*

"Would you believe our permalube is all gone?"  
Quindy asked.

"Falger been drinking again?"

"Ho-flainin'-ha, Kali," Trafalgar said. "Quindy's serious."

"Leak?"

"Intact?, Quindy answered. (The door to the con slid open and Cinnabar entered.) "Know anything that could cause this Helf?"

Before Disc & Bud's captain could reply, another voice came from the comm. "*I do. Bacteria.*"

*Sunmother's* crew saw appear on the screen the head of Kalahari's second mate, seated next to her captain.

*Valustriana See?! Trafalgar thought.- Lord lord...1 haven't seen that one in years! Her name wasn't posted with Kali's crew. . . .*

"Pos. Permalube-eaters," Val was saying. "*They exist, really. I think you've been sabotaged.*"

"Slok!" Quindy gasped. "You're not just jocking around?"

*"Neg. You're not the first"*

"Windramrner?"

*"Pos."*

"Sabotage," Trafalgar said. "Oh wonderful. Now what?"

*"The scrute isn't all bad," Kalahari said. "It just so happens that you've run into the best-prepared captain along the spaceways."*

"Meaning?" Quindy asked.

*"Meaning that among other things I have always carried a spare feed of permalube. You're welcome to it."*

"Now who's jocking around?" Quindy said. Really?

Why would anyone carry spare lube as a matter of course?"

*"Because: It Happens. There's always the odds-off possibility of traumatic leak, even if you've never seen it before."*

*I figure that makes the odds worse, actually. If you've never been sabotaged, you're due. Besides—when have you ever known anything labeled 'perm' that really was?"*

"Kali, you are an angel from—uh—Terasaki," Trafalgar said.

*"From Andor."*

"Couldn't be. Angels on Andor have bigger knobbls."

*"I'll ignore that, Falger, you grat-humper! Blueshift, Satana Coalition. C'monboard!"*

An S-tunnel was rigged between the two spaceships. Quindy, Trafalgar, and Cinnabar made their way through the looping polymer tube to *Disc & Bud*. Cinnabar volunteered to transfer the permalube (a one-person job, in zero G) so the others could use a parcel of precious Race time visiting:

While Quindy and Kalahari were catching up, Trafalgar took Whitey aside.

"Where did you pick up that big gal?"

"Valustriana's our second," Whitey told him. "She used a pseudo in the postings. I asked why but Kalahari told me to zip it. It's the only thing she's ever been short with us about. Won't explain why Val's onboard. There's some other reason than crewing, I'm sure of that. They obviously don't like each other, either:"

"Not surprising," Trafalgar said. "Two positives do not a magnet make. Who gives the orders, Valustriana or Kalahari?"

"The *captain*," Whitey said, surprised. "Val is pushy. Is that what you're getting at? Where do you know her

"Rep only, Whitey. Never met her. She—crewed for friend of mine once. How do you like working for Kali?"

"We love it." Whitey smiled. "she's a fine captain."

*"Pos, she is," Trafalgar said. "And what would you say*

*if you knew that this selfsame Kalahari Cuw once implanted me with a minibomb!? But no; that wasn't this captain at all. That was someone called Hellfire....*

*All right, here you go off the edge again, Trafale boy,* he thought. He turned to the two space captains.

"Captain Quindy, ma'am," he said. "And Captain Kalahari."

The two turned bemused faces on him. "So formal, Trafalgar!" Kalahari smiled.

"He must want something," Quindy said.

"Pos, ma'am. Request permission to transfer to *Disc & Bud*, Captain Quindy—Captain Kalahari!"

Kalahari's expression turned to puzzlement. Quindy's was harder to read. Trafalgar couldn't be sure whether anger or hurt dominated.

"Reason?" she said.

"Personal." Then Trafalgar relaxed his formal stance. "Oh—old times' sake, darlin'. Just want to visit Kali for awhile. Don't worry. I'll be back."

Valustriana See watched and listened with an impassive demeanor. Inwardly she was relieved.

*This could be good, she thought. One of her old cronies may be a stabilizing influence on Hellfire. I'm beginning to think she's getting too much of her old character back!*

"I'd like to talk to you alone Trafalgar," Quindy said quietly. She took his arm and steered him to a corner of the tiny mess-cabin.

"Traf, what is this all *about*?"

"I told you, Quin. Just a *visit*."

"You don't have—I mean—with Kalahari ... ?"

"Great Theba, Quin! We're friends but it could never go into that. If it's my trysting you're getting fobby about, forget it! I mean with those two lesbians?"

"Two . . ? Traf, do you know this Valuster pers?"

"Oh—she doesn't remember me. Long time ago. We *are* both from Outreach, y'know."

"Big planet Outreach."

"Quin, I don't even like her. She's too tall for me. Not very attractive either."

"Now you *are* lying. She's beautiful. And since when are you bigoted about height?"

"Excuse me, Cap' m," Cinnabar's voice interrupted them. "The lube is transferred and we have a request. . . ."

Quindy turned. Spinner, arrayed in its recently-acquired translahelm (courtesy of Cinnabar, before the Race), stood beside the Jarp from Satana Coalition,

"Yes?" Quindy said.

Cinnabar turned to Spinner. The musician hesitated. Then: "Captain, I wish to transfer to your ship!"

Quindy raised her eyebrows. "Those bacteria carrying something that catches? Why?"

Spinner put a hand to its midsection. "It's my stomach, Captain. *All* my insides. These space jumps. . . ."

"You won't get any relief on Sunmother, Spinner," Trafalgar told the Jarp, grateful for the diversion. "If you think Kalahari converts with abandon—"

"I don't expect relief," it said, its face melancholy. "I don't even expect survival. If I'm going to die, I want to be among Jarps!"

Trafalgar laughed—perhaps a bit too loudly. Even Quindy managed to show amusement.

"I'm sorry, Spinner," she said. "I don't mean to make light of your discomfort. Permission granted." She looked at Trafalgar, her face rigid. "Fair exchange, I guess." She wheeled and strode from the cabin. Looking after her, he sighed. Oh, well.

• • •

"You were pretty jovial, not to say cavalier, in taking the lead away from *Sunmother*, Kali," Trafalgar said. He sipped at his plass of berbun and looked across the table in *Disc & Bud's* captain's cabin at its master.

"Hey, I stopped to help," she said. "Lost time doing so. Quindy wouldn't still *be* in the Race if not for me. Besides--- what's a position or two between friends? Seems to me you were pretty cavalier in leaving." She picked up her own plass, sipped, shook her head. "I do wish Stillwell had transferred stead of you, Trafalgar. No offense."

"Oh, of course not. My attractions are all acquired. Still- well's talents are inborn. Cavalier, well ...I dunno. Does it matter?"

"I don't know, Traf. Does it?" Kalahari paused. Then, "Does Valustriana know who you are?"

He flipped his fingers. "Who knows who knows what about whom? Why should she?"

"She's TGO."

"/s she. Well, I'm not surprised. they're all over this Race. That's probly how she knew about the bacteria. Maybe she knew someone was planning sabotage and that's why she's here."

"I'm not surprised you're not surprised. And neg, that's not why she's here. She's here because of me." Kalahari drained the plass and stiktited it to a wall patch at her elbow.

"You?" Trafalgar said, his interest quickening.

"Pos." Kalahari flipped her fingers. "I'm—under observation. For possible *recruitment*. Not voluntary, you understand. Past mistakes. I'm being forced to reimburse Delventine, too."

"Oh, lord," Traflager said quietly. "Um they would do that, wouldn't they? Kali, I'm sorry."

"Can you help, Trafalgar?" Her tone was open, pleading. "I don't mean with Delventine. I don't grudge that. But. ..."

"Me? How?"

"You know. Your TGO clearance."

He sighed and put his fingertips together. "You once hated me for that."

"I used to hate a lot of things," Kalahari said. "Mostly now I hate the hating I used to do."

His hand touched hers, briefly. "Kali. . . I've told you I'm a subdeepercover agent for TMSMCo. I got their sponsorship for Sunmother. I'll tell you these three things: first, I've always done what I felt I needed to do. For a long time now that has been good for you and the Coalition. Now I feel I need to be onboard your ship. It doesn't mean I'm abandoning Quindy.

"Second: Valustriana See does not know Inc. Third: Hellfire ole dear, those code numbers that seem to open some doors for me will not enable me to help you with TGO. If they've got obs on you, you just have to play out that hand and get as much of your own over as possible. Incidentally, I would prefer that neither Val See nor anyone else knows about my entry into TGO's banks. Do that for me?"

"Of course, Traf. Oh—call me Kalahari, hmm?" "Right. That's my speech for this lifetime. Believe or disbelieve—just keep judging me by my actions, as you always have—Kalahari Cuw. I don't have to tell you we're friends. You've seen it."

During this last Kalahari had put her face into hands. Trafalgar was rocked to hear a sob from behind those hands. The small frame with the thatch of short white hair trembled.

He rose and rounded the table. He knelt before her chair. Gently he removed her hands from her tear-streaked face and kissed them.

"They've only taken cred from you, Cap'm Prass-toP," he said. "You can survive that. If it comes to it theres more back on Knor!"

She smiled weakly. "If we could ever find that damned icepit again.

"Traf, what if they recruit me, though? I don't want to work for The Gray Organization."

He closed his eyes and shook his head firmly. "Hasn't happened yet, darlin'. Don't go converting before safepoint. Well, unless you're Quindy."

"Booda's balls, does she do *that*?"

"You wouldn't believe it, Kali! I'll tell you all about it later. Right now we've got some collapstars to negotiate. Let's redshift."

He came to his feet and held her hand as she rose. She smiled at him; spontaneously they hugged each other. As they headed for the corridor Trafalgar said:

"By the way, what's this Booda stuff? You've been on Terasaki too long, my li'l Outie sister...."

Coincidence was always possible. When examined closely it often turned out not to have been strictly chance. Good reasons could tip the odds in favor of unlikely happenings.

The ten—eight, now—racers were by definition as closely matched as possible. Good enough cause for three of them, in all the parsecs, the lightyears, the vast purple abyss of the Galaxy (and only the hub of the Galaxy at that) to arrive at the same approximate point at nearly the same

"Skylia and Katybdis directly ahead, Captain Kalahari:" Whitey said. "And—two ships between us and Roche 's Alley."

"Can you get their signatures?"

The mate ordered an ASRS\*. The off-white telit that

\* ASRS: All Sensors Report, Syncretized

signified "Command understood" followed by turquoise for "Initiated" indicated that SIPACUM had begun to search out the signs that would identify the ships--if those signs were stored in Disc & Bud's membanks. Sensors "sniffed" the ion trails left by the ships' exhausts, ultra-boosted the sonic telltales broadcast by the ships' normal electronic functionings, sighted each craft's unique configuration.

The sendisps reported.

"Don Arcibo's *Ruy Diaz* in the lead," Whitey said. "Damn! Leapfrogged by the fastest ship going," Kalahari said. "Bad enough we lost two places playing angel."

"And ... Ulf's *Starsucker* a close second!" the Aglayan said, amazed.

"Flainin' scut, how'd he do that?" "That adol's a mover," Valustriana said from the cornputrician's chair.

"He's moving now," Whitey said. "Arcibo's about to enter the Alley and Ulf's right on his tail. Can't be more than six kloms out."

"That's crazy," Kalahari said. "Is everybody in this Race completely fraggy?"

"I'll admit I've never seen a looser-glued collection of flitters in my life," Val said. "If this is how you people behave all the time I'm astounded you've survived this long."

"Survived and prospered, up to a point, Mate," Kalahari told her. "If you want to beat people who've popped the° airlocks you gotta jump out after 'em. Once you've made the free choice to race, you no longer have free choice. Matter of coercion, almost. They're ahead, they're moving We follow. We move."

"You mean we're going to chase those fobber up Roche's Alley?" Val asked. "Jockey for position between the collapstars?"

"Give that woman the chocolate redstick," Kalahari said, and even the businesslike Whitey chuckled. Kalahari toed the inship comm. "Pransy! Getcher little pale tail up here pres. I want my best comp on duty." She off-commed without awaiting a response. "Valustriana, you're offcom for now, but stand by. Whitey?"

"Ready, Captain. And—eager!"

"All right, jacko. Follow those ships. We are going to meet the monsters!"

## 15

Diseased nature oftentimes breaks forth in strange eruptions.

—William Shakespeare

We are so outnumbered there's only one thing to do. We must attack.

—Sir Andrew Browne Cunningham

Neither Skylla nor Karybdis was near the size of the Maelstrom. What they lacked in individual impressiveness they made up with teamwork. Standing like guardians at the gates of the Camadyne Void, they forced any spacefarers headed out that way either to detour or play a deadly game of threadthe-needle.

The needle kept moving, just to make it interesting. As the two giant magnets orbited each other in shifting imbalance, the corridor between them shifted as well. The corridor formed by Roche's Limit—the points in both stars' gravitational influence within which nothing could escape, and outside which anything moving fast enough could. Two spheres of gravitic influence, ever trying to intersect.

Not that there was much out that way to interest spacefarers. It was not the route to Barbro Transfer Station This was strictly a Race course, a roundabout path designed to

test ship-handling skills against the hungry tug of these to horrors. Going too far toward one's Limit to avoid the other's could easily do for a ship.

So, too, could the great plasma streams, ribbons of matter millions of kloms in length being pulled from one collapstar to the other, directly across the corridor know to spacefarers as Roche's Alley. A ship could be vaporized by contact with one of these, ending up as particulate matter in the stream.

"A regular spacefarer's funhouse," Cluse Fameline said to her captain.

"A challenging funhouse, Cluse," Manjanungo said. "A challenge worthy of a well-bred ship and captain."

Cluse thought it might almost be worth dying to see the look on Manjanungo's face, just for a moment, if he fobbed it in the Alley. She sat back wearily in her second's chair.

"What the vug is that?" Hummer said from the chair in front of her.

"What?" Manjanungo asked. Then he looked at the screen. "Haysuse! Has that child come undocked'r

Manjanungo knew that Ulf was on his tail and closing recklessly. He rather admired that. Moreover, it gave zest to the whole undertaking. He naturally assumed that Ulf intended pressing him, trying to make him nervous, make him—if not actually hit a plasma stream or be caught by one of the collapstars—lose time. Narrow the lead so that *Starsucker* could pass *Ruy Diaz* once they'd exited the Alley.

In this Ulf was a captain after Manjanungo's own heart. Daring and unscrupulous. Now it appeared that the youngster was also insane.

He was trying to pass while still in the Alley!

The leeway here was slight, for although the stars were a few million kloms apart their gravity fields were not. They were also variable, and predictable only along broad general

patterns. Near Roche's Limit they changed constantly by a few degrees, a few kloms, at a time. SIPACUM could predict only a decidedly short distance ahead and had to adjust course continually. Anything that got in the way of those maneuvers could spell the end of any further possibility of maneuvering. *Starsucker* was now in the way.

"Hummer, hail that stupid shader and tell him I'll him brought before the Race Commission for endangerment if he doesn't pull back pres. Passing in Roche's Alley!"

"I've been hailing on all frequencies, Captain. No response."

"Essing slinker! He must be unglued. . . . Santa! He's blueshifting! He's not trying to pass, he's trying to force us into Karybdis."

"Shall I take evasive action, Captain?" Hummer asked. "What evasive action? Where? We're just outside the horizon now." Manjanungo hit inship comm. "Paridon! Ready DS systemry to port!"

"DS Yes, sir! Pres!"

"Cluse, redshift to the comp station and tight-monitor our vector. Any hint of a demon in the banks, switch to backup, pres! Hummer, SIPACUM to M-and-C. Keep a scan on what Cluse feeds you and maneuver accordingly. Your responsibility is to keep us out of the plasma and off of those stars. Pay no repeat No attention to that demon out there. If yer need to shift the ship, do it! I'll be standing by repulsors and Monitoring DS."

Cluse moved. The knowledge that her own life depended upon her instantaneous transmission of readouts overcame her accustomed lassitude. She began watching the GAD's reports on the fluctuating gravity wells to either side of *Ruy Diaz*.

"I" Manjanungo said, "am going to show that baby-turned-captain something about nerve!"

*Starsucker* came on slowly, confidently. *Ruy Diaz's* cabin remained silent save for the drone of Cluse's voice relaying coordinates to Hummer and the crackle of plasma static over the commlink. Manjanungo kept it open and loud-up, ready for instant messaging from Ulf.

The other spacer loomed less than a klom off portside, now Ulf began again the maneuver that had worked so well against *Zenana Lady*. Turning *Starsucker's* bow toward the other ship, accelerating slightly, aiming to cross Ruy Diaz's bow like the leg of an inverted y. Manjanungo watched, hands hovering over his controls....

Cluse's voice leaped in pitch and volume. "Increase! Increased pull! Need three per cent port acceleration *now!*"

Hummer hit the toggles for the starboard maneuvering rockets. Heavily, dreamlike, fighting the fetters of gravity, *Ruy Diaz* started to slide to port. Manjanungo keyed his ship's attractor beams, reversed. Lightless walls of force sprang out toward his opponent, fore and aft. The closing of the two ships diminished. . . ceased. They began to move toward *Skylla* in tandem, as if linked.

Then a glow appeared around the edges of *Starsucker*.

"He's hit his own MR," Manjanungo muttered. "If they're heavier than ours. . ."

"That ship's the same class as Vettering's Porkchop," Hummer said. "They're heavier."

"It'll push us right back," Manjanungo said. "No choice then. Paridon!"

"*Sir!*"

"Hit him forward with both guns. See if yer can shift him."

Before Paridon could respond, a flash appeared in space just ahead of *Starsucker*. Then another

"DS!" Manjanungo said. "Not ours! It came from above. Who . . .?"

"Cap'm, another ship to port and rear," Hummer said "Six hundred hours low in the horizontal plane, half a Mon; out."

"Checking membanks now, Cap'm," Cluse said. "ship is. . .*Disc & Bud!*"

"The Aglayan abomination? Neg, the captain's an Outie, isn't she? What's her name. . . ?"

"Kalahari Cuw, sir."

"Why in the name of the virgin is she attacking *Starsucker?*"

"Your father's calcified rocks I will! Why should I attack *Starsucker?*"

Kalahari Cuw's reddened face glared up-at the semshigher and degrees-cooler one of Valustriana See.

"Warning shots only," the lofty woman said. "*Starsucker* is trying to force Don Arcibo off course. We are going to aid *Ruy Diaz*."

"Why?" Kalahari was nearly screaming now.

(Trafalgar stood to one side and marveled as he watched what seemed to be the re-emergence of the volatile pirate Hellfire from submersion in the persona of Kalahari Cuw.)

"Because I say so," Val said. "Because it's orders. Because you know that." Then, more softly: "The deal, Kalahari."

Kalahari fought with herself, her fury trying to burst free. She fought—and won, and tasted no joy in the victory, Hellfire was defeated. . . though Kalahari Cuw looked the loser.

She turned, hands on the back of her chair, head lowered.

Valustriana See turned to her fellow Outie. "Trafalgar go aft to DS. I'll give you instructions when you get there."

Trafalgargar shrugged and remained immobile. "I'm just a passenger on this ship. Don't know the first thing about

Defense Systemry, Anyway, I Only take orders from the captain.

Kalahari turned to him, her face shamed "Trafalgar Do it. She's in charge of this one. Neg! Wipe that." She turned Val again, a little of her fire rekindled. "Do it yourself! You want it, *you* work DS."

Valustriana's long legs, bare below the sleeveless v-neck skinnTite, carried her to the door in a stride and a half. Their last view of her was a boot heel and a flutter of dark

"Kali," Trafalgar said shortly. "You know me better."

"Oh shit. You're right, Trafalgar. Get after that furbag. You handle DS. I don't want one of those ships hit by accident

Trafalgar caught up with Val as she was settling her leggy body behind the gunnery console. He stood in the hatchway of the turret. She waited, looking at him.

"See," he said, "does this have to be? We're going to take sides in a fight between a saboteur and a pirate?"

Her brow wrinkled in puzzlement but she answered with a nod. "Pirate and slaver. Pos."

"In that case move over and let me in there. Captain's orders," he said as he pushed past her.

She stood watching him as he punched in coordinates and lined up the systemry on its target. She watched the quiet competence of this man who seemed to be nothing space bum, a hard-drinking loosecard who yet operated DS like a Gunner First and did so as coolly as any agent she knew. *Including me.*

"Who are you, Cuw?" she said at last. "Why are you here?"

"*'From Resh with Love,'* right? The interrogation scene?"

Look, Valustriana. I understand why you're doing what you're doing. Well, no, actually I don't, but I accept it.

Let that be enough for now, huh? I'm concentrating."

He snapped off two fast shots directly across the bow of spacer *Starsucker*.

"Ulf, they're shooting at us! Break off and drop back."

"Can't now, Ali. They've both seen what we tried to do. They'll carve our butts no matter where we go if we let either of them escape."

The boy was sweating now. He was not afraid of Manjanungo. Although he knew the Joser was better than he was, Ulf had surprise and position on his side. It evened the odds. Good odds was all Ulf ever asked. Skill and daring coupled with good odds and an edge of aggressiveness had always produced a winning hand for Ulf Jort.

Fighting Manjanungo and Kalahari Cuw simultaneously was not good odds, but even worse odds freighted the prospect of being wanted not locally but Galaxy-wide by TGW.

He had to fight them both.

"Ig," he told the inship comm, "Lock DS onto *Disc & Bud*. I'm going to decelerate and take her first. Manjanungo won't want to lose headway—"

"Ulf! Plasma stream!" Alianora shouted.

Ulf snapped his attention back to the forward viewscreen. Looming ahead of *Starsucker*, a million kloms distant, a gigantic ragged band of glowing spacestuff stretched clear across Roche's Alley from star to star. 'A million kloms' At near-light speed, a few seconds.

He had to choose a course, and quickly.

So did the other two ships. If no way could be found over or under the stream all three spacers were doomed, if they stayed in normal space, a normal state of existence. As a last expedient they could take the option of converting to tachyons, unprepared Of jam-cramming: going Forty Percent City. Risking unknown disaster or, possibly, salvation.

Manjanugo decided. Acted. The bottom edge of the stream appeared to be reachable. He thre on reverse power to buy time, and headed for it.

Kalahari decided. Her SIPACUM indicated apparent terminus of the stream in a "downward" direction. At the same instant Whitey reported Manjanugo's veering that way. She put the two together and acted. *Disc & Bud* lowered its nose and dived.

Ulf decided. He saw a ragged darkness near the top of his viewscreen and made it out to be the upper edge of the stream. He pointed Starsucker's nose "upward" and headed for it.

The thin black streak in the plasma moved down on his screen. Above it the view was filled with the continuing enormity of the river of glowing space matter. Even as he watched, the luminescence swirled into and swallowed the small black gap.

He reversed his maneuver, still accelerating. Too late. There might have been a slight chance of slipping through that black opening. It was gone now. A wall of boiling, radiating starblood blueshifted toward him at eyepaining velocity.

"Can't do it!" he yelled. His hand shot out, hesitated, hovering over the unthinkable.

"Ulf, no!"

"We're dead if—" His own words encompassed the necessary decision and he 'never completed them. His palm slapped down on the button that would convert Starsucker and all within to analogues of themselves composed of the submicroscopic particles called tachyons. To all intents and purposes they would still be themselves with, under normal conditions, one difference: they would now be moving at a velocity far faster than light.

These were not normal conditions, and there would be at least one other difference: they would be ... elsewhere.

*Disc & Bud* arced up behind the monstrous curtain of deadly matter. Its crew saw ahead of them the glowing exhaust of *Ruy Diaz's* sublight drive.

"*Starsucker!*" Kalahari said. "Did they get through?"

"I didn't see them after we dropped," Whitey told her.

"Sensors lost everything as we came under," Pransa added.

"There's nothing but visual yet," Whitey said. "Emissions have all the sensors fobbied."

"What about the comm-recs?" Kalahari asked. "We should have recordings from the Race TPs onboard the other ships."

"Blank," Whitey answered. "Grayed out just before encountering the plasma. *Starsucker's* certainly would have been off anyway. Ulf wouldn't broadcast his own criminal act.

"The sensors won't pick up a slicin' thing in that radioactive cesspool back there, either," Kalahari said. "So we don't know if he hit or—jam-crammed."

"If he came through," Pransa said, "he's nowhere near us.

"Neither is Manjanungo." Whitey pointed to the screen. The slaver's yacht had vanished from the spaceways. Up ahead was only the blackness of the Carnadyne Void.

"That slinker can make a fast jump when he wants to, Kalahari said through grinding teeth. "He's well on his way to Barbro. So why am I talking? Pransy! There must be a safepoint—"

"Got it already. Conversion in thirty-seven seconds."

"Everybody glued back there?" Kalahari said into the inship.

Trafalgar's voice floated lightly back. "*Wonderful. A little sunburned maybe, or that could be my imagination. And my wristchron's going backward.*"

"*I'm fine,*" Val said. "*I think I'm some shorter from*

*G forces and a bit purple-skinned where I sat down so hard. somewhere in her mind. Nice work, Captain Cuw!"*

Kalahari ignored the compliment, though it registered

"Twenty-three seconds," Pransa said.

"Double-P?" Whitey asked.

"Double-P?" Kalahari repeated. "You strapped down?"

*"Pos—Captain—thank you,"* came the weak voice of Petaluma Peeh. *"What—I have left—is strapped down...."*

Whitey shook his head ruefully. "It's a wonder that poor woman has a stomach left."

"Five seconds!" Pransa snapped.

"And—here—we—go!" Kalahari said as *Disc & Bud* hit the Tachyon Trail for Barbro.

## 16

One thing I know about my life is, I can't live without it. . . .

—Robin Kincaid, *We Can Talk About It*

"Ali, are you all right?" Ulf felt his limbs as he spoke, hardly daring to believe he was uninjured.

"Pos. I'm fine. Everything feels right. What happened to the lights?"

Ulf swung his gaze around in the blackness of the cabin. He recalled the phrase "survival with unspecified damage," that described one of the possible results of going City.

"Don't know," he said. He groped for the comm button. "Ig? Eissa! Can you hear me back there? Anyone hurt?"

Nothing. Then a bumping, a scrape, and "*Negatory, Captain,*" Igeya said. "*Unless you count bumps and . bruises.*"

"Comm's up," Ulf said, "so we've got—"

"*Same here, Captain,*" Eissa said. "*We got tossed around, 'sall.*"

"Good," Ulf said. "Try to check—Ah!"

SIPACUM's lights winked twice and came alive. Almost immediately thereafter the cabin lights flashed and came back on.

"Run full systems checks," Ulf told Alianora. "I'll scan our position. Everyone else check for localized damage

Ulf called up star charts from the computer's membanks, comparing them to what he saw on the mainscreen. When it became apparent that they were nowhere in the vicinity of Skylla and Karybdis he ordered SIPACUM to compare charts of the known universe at speed. In just under a minute he had his answer.

They were nowhere.

"No known chart matches any of this," he muttered. "Even extrapolating and rotating for hypothetical positions in other known galaxies. Either we're in a part of the universe no one knows about or. ..."

"Or we're in another universe," Alianora finished.

Ulf nodded. "Systems checks?"

"ASP.\* Everything functional according to SIPACUM. Ship seems to have integrity—unless SIPACUM's lying to us.

"Lying?"

"Unless SIPACUM itself is fobbed and our scrute is unreliable."

"*Negative damage aft, Captain,*" Ig reported.

"Shift forward and keep scanning as you go," Ulf ordered.

"Well," Ali said, "if this is the Dark Universe it's not so bad."

Ulf shook his head. "No. We appear to be in the lucky percentage who have survived intact."

"So can we go back? Do we try?"

"The True God knows, to your first question. No one who's gone City and returned has ever reported any of these star formations. Or even being aware of a Dark Universe. Returners from City know only that they took a flit on the Tachyon Trail. Presumably those are the ones who lucked out on a safeport. Evidently we didn't. Although we've

\* ASP: All Systems Pos

suffered no apparent damage, and some of them had.

"As to your second question—pos. What else can We do?"

The others reported in: negative damage throughout.

"That temporary outage must have been due to the plasma," Ulf said. "Everything else checks. You got an SPTC, Ali?"

"Pos. But ... will converting take us home? I mean when we convert in our universe we stay there, or at least return there."

"I don't know. We'll just have to try. We'll convert, then reconvert. See where we end up. Since we don't know where we're starting from, we can't plot a course."

"Ulf? If that doesn't work. . . ?"

He sighed. "Then—we jam-cram again. From here to, we hope, there."

"Do you know the odds on surviving that twice?" Ali reached for the console to compute them.

"Neg, and don't bother telling me. It's that or stay here. Unless we decide on the latter the odds make no difference." She removed her hand. "Firm."

"That safepoint?" Ulf asked.

"Coming up in five."

They waited. Quietly, with nothing worth saying until they had determined whether they were to live or die. Igeya and Eissa joined them oncon. At one minute to SPTC Ulf ordered them to strap down. He looked at Alianora, his mouth set.

"Here we go," he said as SIPACUM counted down the seconds. A red light flashed on, their vision distorted, their innards shifted—then settled. SIPACUM showed *Starsucker* safely in conversion.

"Well!" Alianora said.

"Well indeed as you so aptly put it. Halfway there. Next SPTC?"

"We're in luck. I guess. ....,Depending. Ninety-foursecs.'

"Don't even have to strap down twice, " Ulf said over his shoulder to the two crewmembers Again they waited.

Again SIPACUM used up the seconds.

"Firm, then," Ulf said. "With a touch more luck we'll soon be on a course to Barbro"

Again the red light, again the sickening changing of flesh to tachyons. Alianora had a weird momentary sensation that the indicators were . . . not right, somehow. The console chron appeared to be running in reverse. And could it really be toting up years elapsed, not seconds? She assj it must be due to her temporarily distorted vision.

*Unless—SIPACUM is fobbied . . .*

A settling, a focusing-

-a warning buzzer, a flashing light. The lowmass scanner. The screen showed not space and stars but a huge hulking grayness, blueshifting, spinning....

"Ulf!" Alianora screamed.

He did not reply. He was too busy hitting, for the second time that day, the controls that gave SIPACUM the order to jam-cram. Nothing seemed to happen. The grayness just bulked there, closing. Alianora felt—something. Conversion? Then what was—that *pressure* ...?

For an endless instant she couldn't get her breath. She heard screams that couldn't have been hers. No, she only thought she had. They were gone now. A whooshing sound assaulted her ears. Or—was it in her head? She felt as if the blood were being sucked from her brain....

Many things could be seen from the Crystal Palace Room in the Star-Hung Lounge on Barbiti Transfer Station. Enormous transparent walls made this watering hole one of the most Popular in the Galaxy. Usually it was filled with 'farers Who had been too long within the confines of their vessels and appreciated the relief of the spacious view. As the torus

that was Barbro wheeled about on its axis one alternately gazed in toward the hub or out toward the Carnadyne Void. Nearest of all was a mass of asteroids and other small bodies, down to the size of dust. The reflected light of the hub stars they threw back was truly spectacular.

Today, though, spacefarers constituted only a small portion of the occupants of the Star-Flung. And astronomical bodies were not the objects of the occupants' skywatch.

These people were Race fans, hoping that one or two at least of the racers would round Barbro near enough slowly enough, and with Barbro turned to the right position, that they might be visible from the station. Perhaps some captain might even be daring enough to risk conversion within viewing distance. Manjanungo had done it, five years back, though it helped earn him only a third. The Joser sportsman, disappointingly, was not entered this year. There was Quindarissa, she might do it. (She had not been heard from, though, since *Sunmother's* last conversion out near Franji. Rumors ran wild that Quindy had tried to take Roche's Alley in conversion.

(Kalahari Cuw's *Disc & Bud* had been on that same course for awhile—a mini-duel within the larger contest. She had threaded the Alley in normal space, though, just after Don Arcibo.)

Don Arcibo, now. He might just be daring enough to provide the thrill the fans hoped for. . . .

He wasn't. He did, however, come in tight and fast. Barbro faced precisely as the fans would have wished. Ruy Diaz afforded an exhilarating sight as it whipped around Barbro-

-nearly colliding with *Disc & Bud*, which fantastically appeared from the opposite direction to circle Barbro so closely that fans could read its name with binoculars. It zipped off on Arcibo's trail. A classic for Race fans to talk about for years. Surely the most magnificent sight they

would be treated to this time out, they congratulated each other .

They were wrong.

It happened farther out from Barbo than the two racers had come off the Tachyon Trail, a thousand kloms or so. Where both gravity and atmosphere were lacking, explosions spread fast and wide. The flash lit the inside of the Star-Flung Lounge, caroming around among the innumerable mirrors that comprised its decor. ("Looked like a Jarp with a glow on," one patron on his third mackerbacker said afterward, of the lurid orange refulgence.) Out in space it looked like a toroidal fire rippling away from its epicenter.

Race fans would indeed talk of the amazing flyby for years, but for the next three days, on Barbro at least, the great explosion was the only topic of note. Mainly the talk ran to speculation on the causes of the cataclysm. Until TGW patrollers finally brought in enough debris to provide an explanation. . . .

"Must have been trying a daredevil conversion, Cougar," Lemble said into his comm. "At least that's all we can think of. There wasn't another chunk of sizable rock within a quarter-million kloms of that side of Barbro. Their lowmass scanner would never have led them onto it like that in normal space."

*"Shouldn't have done so coming back from conversion, other,"* the electronically anonymous voice of Cougar said. *"Yet he couldn't have been hitting the Tachyon Trail there. Must have been coming back. But from where?"*

"Last probable point of conversion would have been just past Skylla and Karybdis, Cougar."

*"SIPACUM wouldn't have bungled that unless it was fobbied somehow. Demons in it someplace."*

"Pos. We have no other explanation."

*"Well, well. So Starsucker piles up on an asteroid and*

*we're rid of a pain in the ass and a false hope. Too bad. Nasty little Captain Ulf was skillful and clever. Died on the way to becoming competent; Rest In Pieces."*

"Shall we assume our saboteur is gone, then?"

*"Absolutely. Assume what you want as long as it doesn't affect your job. Remember what I said: I don't want to hear about it. I'll assume you haven't assumed."*

"Firm, Cougar. Uh, Captain Chane has withdrawn his protest."

*"What protest?"*

"About the lamprey. You remember—"

*"I remember the lamprey. What protest?"*

"His formal protest that TGW wouldn't do anything about finding the saboteur. He nearly came unglued when we told him that nothing could be done. Of course I didn't say that we wanted to uncover the perpetrator 'for ourselves—"

*"Good thinking, Lemble,"* Cougar said. Agent Lemble could almost see the sarcasm. *"I do seem to recall something you told me, pos. I thought it of no importance. Report on Agent See?"*

"Agent See reports that Captain Cuw is in full command of her ship and skills and is as daring as anyone she's seen. Her command over herself, though, has shown dangerous signs."

*"Under what circumstances?"*

"When ordered to attack *Starsucker*."

*"Well of course! I'd get fraggy, too, if someone gave me orders on my own ship. Sounds promising. Anything else?"*

"Pos. There's *Sunmother* —"

*"I heard that on the holos, Lemble. Anything I don't know?"*

"Negatory, Cougar."

*"Fine. Out."*

"Out—Cougar • - ." Lemble said, again into a dead comm.

He off-commed, wondering if it was a good or bad thing that he was reporting directly to someone as high up in TGO as he had been told Cougar ranked.

*Maybe. . . if there was something good to report, Lemble thought. Accidents, froggy captains....And now I've lost half next year's cred betting on a slipsuckin' sure thing! Put it on Quindarissa, they told me. She's the favorite, the one to beat*

*So now Sunmother's dead in space and out of the Race halfway to Bleak!*

17

Plodding wins the race.

—Aesop

"I'm afraid even you can't bring us all the way to Andor in conversion, Quindy," Cinnabar said. "The double-damned double-p is burned out and that's it. New lube's nearly all gone now, too."

Quindy leaned on the arm of her chair, thumb on cheekbone and two fingers rubbing her brow in frustration.

"Even if we had more lube it wouldn't help," Sweetface said. "That short time we ran with it low did the damage."

"Five years," Quindy said. "Five years. ."

Cinnabar looked at her sympathetically. Either it chose not to reply, or was incapable.

"Well!" Quindy said, sitting up and setting her lips together firmly for a moment. "Lucky Janja. She wasn't here to see us burn out her ship's drive. Nor is she going to have to card for a new one. We are. Insurance doesn't cover bacterial attack!"

"We're not exactly poor," Cinnabar said. "Afraid you won't get the rich shares you expected this jaunt, though, Sweetface."

The other Jarp flipped its fingers. "I was in the Race. A

valuable experience for a 'farer. Besides, I have a feeling this story isn't entirely told yet. Who sabotaged us?"

"I don't think you'd get any poorer if you bet on a certain Race inspector," Quindy said sourly. "Or if you bet that he wasn't really a Race inspector. Beyond that..." She shrugged. "Cinnabar, comm Soljstation."

"Bleak's nearer," Cinnabar said.

Quindy and Sweetface stared at Cinnabar with bland expressions.

"Firm. Sorry," it said. "Don't know why I said that ..."  
"Comm Soljer," Quindy repeated. "Ask them—to send us a tow!"

"We just can't gain any more on the flainer," Kalahari said. "There are no more places to cut corners on the run back. That's where the strategy in this Race lies: you get the lead on the jaunt out or you don't get it."

"We gained a little rounding Jorinne," Valustriana said. "What about Terasaki?"

Kalahari leaned on her hand, thumb to cheekbone, fingers rubbing her forehead. It was a characteristic position, one that Quindy had unconsciously picked up from her former captain.

She snorted in wry amusement. "Would you believe it's the wrong time of the month?"

"Grunt?"

"Terasaki's moons are lined up wrong. Right now we could pick up only a minimal amount of speed from Ter- asaki Not nearly enough to overcome the lead *Ruy Diaz* has.-.

"So," Trafalgar said, "that slaver Manjanungo excuse me that sportsman Don Arcibo has it latched up.

"Looks that way," Kalahari said. "Pretty anticlimactic for the fans, but there you are. They can't have everything in Optimal positions for their Race. TGO doesn't control

planetary motion—yet." Her tone was pointedly acid.

No one in *Disc & Bud's* con-cabin responded to the comment.

"We'll pick up second, though," Pransa said. "That's not bad."

Kalahari shook her head. "It'd be third except for what happened to Quindy. That's a slimy way to gain a place"

"Don't be so sure we'll be second," Whitey told them all. "The quietly obscure Captain Emery is making quite a workmanlike effort to gain on us—and succeeding!" Kalahari jerked to attention. "What? How?"

"I just picked it up," Whitey answered. "See for yourself."

Kalahari examined the figures on the sendisps intently. A frown spread across her face.

"Blueshifting for sure." Valustriana shook her head in mixed admiration and amazement.

"Damn!" Kalahari clenched her fists, staring. "How'd they do that? They've gained since the last jump."

"There was nowhere for that ship to pick up speed." Trafalgar said.

"They went into conversion, came out, and were ahead," Whitey said. "Impossible—I thought, up till now."

"Unless," Val reminded them, "they converted sooner or came back later...."

Kalahari shook her head. "Neg. In fact they used precisely our conversion points. Which proves that those were the best points."

"Then GM-whatever-they-call-it is a faster ship,

"It sure hasn't shown any sign of being so up until now." Trafalgar pointed out. "If Emery's been holding bacr'--- why?"

"We can ask why later." Kalahari's old grim smile played around her mouth. "Get ready to lose your lunch around

Terasaki, people. If I can't have first I'm gonna tear some skin off for second.

Trafalgar feared she meant the skin of Disc & Bud. He had visions of losing not only his stomach's contents but the ship's hull, in rounding Terasaki's moons.

He was not too far into fantasy. Kalahari kept her ship in conversion until they were actually within the Hubble-Durga system, whose principal planet was Terasaki. She brought them out right on the fringes of an asteroid belt, rammed the ship around Terasaki's outermost moon in such a tight vector that the G-forces caused even Whitey and Pransa to red-out, then converted again so close to the planet that their TPs showed Race fans even the thick cloud cover of its chill gray atmosphere.

The almost insane maneuver accomplished nothing. When they popped back into normal space for the last time in the Race, on the fringes of the T-SA, Whitey focused the forward viewscreen.

"Clear ahead," he reported. Then, "Just a sec. Some thing's—"

"Slime-assed son-of-a-scut!" Kalahari shouted.

The others leaned forward, astonished. A spaceship had materialized on the screen. Ahead and driving into the T-SA, showing them its tail-end as if in deliberate insult.

"Four kloms dead ahead," Whitey muttered disbelievingly. "It's Emery's ship!"

"How?" Kalahari's voice cracked. "How *could* that flainer do that? You can't just jump another ship that way unless you're doing it blind. Is Emery that crazy?"

Whitey glanced over at Pransa. She returned his look of the shared suspicion. He turned back just in time to see the other ship fade and vanish from the screen.

"He is fraggy, or she is, or whoever-the- vug," Kalahari said, sputtering. "The whole slicing crew is! Either that or their converter's gone fobbo."

"Converting that far inside the system is illegal," Val said. "TSP's going to want to talk to them about that."

"While you want to congratulate them?" Kalahari snapped.

Valustriana See was wise enough to say nothing.

Even Whitey's accustomed calm threatened to depart with his next discovery. "Captain, I'm getting a readout Holy Tao, how. ... ?"

"What? What is it, Whitey? Speak. dammit!"

As answer, he merely keyed the Race public-view channel onto the mainscreen. They saw what was being broadcast to observers Galaxywide from the TPs on the lead ship, Don Arcibo's *Ruy Diaz*. It was what they had seen only a minute ago from their own TPs: the stern of Captain Emery's GM1DUF2.

"Do you want me to loud-up the commentary, Captain?" Whitey asked. Kalahari dropped back hard against her chair. She threw up her hands and let them fall to its arms. Her head was shaking not in a negative reply but in disgust and disbelief.

Whitey left the comm silent. His captain's gesture said it: no commentator could explain what they all knew was impossible.

Kalahari found some consolation in "Don Arcibo's" attitude at the prize ceremonies. He stood in his shiny blacks on the platform in Koba's main square, one side of his cape tossed back over his shoulder to reveal the crimson lining. Surrounded by a million carnival-goers, scrutinized by TP cameras that carried his behavior to holovids all over the inhabited part of the Galaxy via subspace laser, the disguised slaver delivered himself of a rambling diatribe against the, mysterious captain who refused to show up even to accept first prize. It was an insult to the fans, he said. To the Galaxy!

Many fans agreed, although not those fortunate few whose,

love of the mysterious and/or gamblers' instincts had led them to bet on the dark horse. Whatever he said, Manjanugo had clearly sacrificed his composure to rage and wounded pride.

Kalahari nee Hellfire knew this pirate's premium on breeding and appearances. She smiled a secret smile, and accepted her third much the same way, with gratitude and grace.

As she left the stand Valustriana See pulled her aside, elbowing two interviewers and poking a third in the eye with the heel of her hand.

"You can meet the acclaim-mongers later, Kalahari. Right now I want to see you inside."

Their relationship was altered now and Kalahari knew it. Onboard, she was Captain. The laws of the spaceways and traditions of millennia dictated it. Onplanet she was just another citizen and Valustriana See was TGO The Gray Organization about whose workings and reach so little was known that anyone would be a fool not to fear it. What *was* known was that those who defied TGO tended to meet with misfortunes ranging from setback to disaster.

Kalahari had no need of this general knowledge. Personal experience served her now. The enormous cred she was sending to Delventine was a setback. She didn't care to risk disaster.

Valustriana led her into the nearby lounge. The place was already crammed with Race fans. The booths and bar seats were filled to capacity with people from most of the inhabited planets. Dancers struggled valiantly to the blaring sounds of the latest Wrig-Wri-Fla hits spilling over from the dance floor into the spaces between tables.

"They're playing that cess in Hari's now?" Val said with distaste. "Won't be any civilized place left to go soon." i

No room in here anyway," Kalahari said. A short woman wearing a purple Terasaki coil on her head sidled up and

silently pushed a card at Kalahari. Kalahari pressed her thumbprint to it and the smiling woman went off without a word.

"How's it feel to be famous instead of notorious?" Val asked.

Kalahari looked at her. "I'll show you how it feels to push me too far in a min."

"Sorry. That was uncalled-for. I'm not happy with this assignment, Kalahari. Especially now.

"Why especially now?"

"Because you're clearly not the pirate you were. Because I admire your abilities. Because you have friends like— like you do. Because I like you.

"Sorry it couldn't work out between us, Tallcakes," Kalahari said with round-eyed irony.

"And that's why I like you." Val smiled. She beckoned to a nearby cyberwaiter. The machine rolled close.

"We'd like a booth with a privascreen," Val told it. "I'm sorry, all our booths are full," the robot waiter said. "Run these figures into the central membanks," Val said. She rattled off a string of numbers.

Lights on the cyberwaiter's "chest" flashed quietly for a few secs. Then it said, "Come this way, please," and led them to a booth in a corner far from the dancers.

The robot spoke to the couple occupying the booth. They arose with sour looks on their faces and stalked past the two spacefarers. The woman, nearly Valustriana's height with bells hanging from her hair and almost wearing a one-strap puce garment that left her right knobble bare, muttered something about "Racer's perks" at Kalahari as she passed.

"The price of fame," Val said as she slid into the booth. "If you're a celebrity everything's your fault." She buttoned the privascreen a gray curtain formed in the air across the end of the booth. It cut off all outer sight and sound.

"I'll have a mackerbacker," Kaiahari said I feel like phasing out.

Val shrugged. "Better take a red with it. We have some business to attend to." She buttoned the barcomm and ordered the powerful drink, along with a Theba's Heaven for herself.

"Hari's is the only place off Outreach knows how to make the things, " she said. "Now I've gotta wade through the music to get one."

"So what's this business?" Kalahari asked. "You trying to tell me I passed? You think I'm working for TOO now?"

"Today you are. You did well, Kalahari. We'll want to use you now and again, for some one-shots. So—you're on call."

Kalahari's face grew tight. "Till further notice, and notice is right now?"

"Pos. I need you to make a visit with me this afternoon.

"To?"

"To the enigmatic Captain Emery. This Race has been a minor disaster for T—for everyone except the fans. Two ships sabotaged, a third destroyed, the saboteurs destroyed. Then there're the big corporations. They just *love* seeing the prize go to an unknown with no sponsorship and no publicity. An unknown who doesn't even show to pick up the Prize. And who seems to be able to pop in and out of subspace at will and yet seems of no use to us. The second prize winner is unhappy, and is a wanted outlaw who is also no use to us --

"Why not?" Kalahari asked "I'm an outlaw. Recruit Manjanugo."

Val shrugged. Her face showed clearly that she would not reply.

Kalahari sighed. Their drinks arrived. . A look from Val as Kalahari started to raise her plas made her put it down

and grudgingly take an antinebri from her go-bag. She popped it and took a big slug of the mackerbacker.

"So why am I going with you to see Emery?"

"I'm dealing with some sort of super-captain here. You're a far better pilot than I am. I may need your expertise for advice or analysis."

Kalahari considered. She nodded.

"I'd come even if you didn't twist my arm," she said. "I'm intrigued. If someone's gonna make as big a fool of me as Emery did I'd like to get a look at what kinda magic did it!"

"Magic" they would see that day. . . but they would not see Captain Emery. That mysterious entity blasted from Kobastation with no clearance minutes before the two women arrived. The last they saw of the unnamed vessel of the (surely pseudonymous) Race winner was on the station's Big Screen.

"That is some ship-handler," Kalahari said in admiration as she watched the craft negotiate crowded asteroid space just past Andor. "I Wouldn't try that."

"They should have put a Detain-and-Seal on that ship!" Val See said angrily. "Stay docked. I'm going to call in-"

There was no need. As the two stared at the screen the object of their attention flickered and vanished from view.

"Jam-crammed," Kalahari whispered. "Why?"

"The questions are *Did it?* and *How?*, Kalahari. Come on. I'm gonna raise some hell."

Lemle was unsure which was worse: being yelled at by Cougar on a longcall or Valustriana See in person. The lofty woman's narrowed eyes burned down into his face as he tried to explain.

"We did put a D&S on Emery's ship! No one got on or off...but no one *was* onboard as far as we could tell. I

mean we *searched*. Nothing. *Empty*. No messages were answered, either."

"An empty ship just blasted off?"

"Neg. I ordered scans, of course." Lemble hesitated.

*Of course?* Valustriana thought. *Even I didn't think of that!* "And".

"Well, ah—three life forms registered as being onboard then four. Then three again. That happened a couple of times. Except when we were searching, naturally. Then the scan only registered us. Naturally."

"Life forms? Meaning?"

"Humans. Sort of. The three were humans. The fourth was ... sometimes. Sort of."

Valustriana sighed. "And the rest of the time?" Lemble glanced uncomfortably at Kalahari. "Just. . .uh . . ."

Valustriana nodded. A similar reading to that given off by a certain Void that is not a Void? She muttered, "So there's another one. . . . Was it male or female, Lemble?"

"Female, ma'am. Sort of."

Val closed her eyes and shook her head as if she were trying to get water off her hair. "Sharpen up the language and put your report in the membanks, huh? I'll scan the whole thing later. Include the readings."

"Right. Ma'am."

Val turned to go, Kalahari a step behind her. Then she stopped, thought, turned.

"Lemble: you did well. None of us could have been more thorough"

"Yes, ma'am! Thank you, ma'am!"

"So Captain Emery is a woman,

As they walked away Val muttered, "Musah save me from competent but over-earnest underlings!"

"So Capatin Emery is a woman," Kalahari said. "Sort of, whatever that means, and I bet you're not going to tell me."

"Go to the booth and transfer your winnings "m not sure I know what it means, Kalahari. I'd give worlds to get one look at that. . . 'woman'!"

In the captain's chair of a nameless spacer sat a woman. The mate's chair next to her was occupied by a strangely stiff-looking man in black robes. His face remained fixed on SIPACUM's lights and readouts. He stared at them, seldom blinking.

His captain was much more animated. In fact she was close to manic, laughing loudly every few seconds as she watched the readouts and scan-winkers. She shook plum.. colored hair in uncontrollable glee.

"What must they have thought when they saw us disappear right in the middle of the asteroid field?" she said. "Ha! Probably think we've gone City, eh, Lurin? That's all right. They already know who's the best. There's nothing left to prove."

"They don't know who you are though, Captain," Lunn said without looking at her.

*I hardly know myself anymore! I'm not sure I ever did.*  
"Does it matter? After all, you don't even know who you are—or rather were—do you, Lurin? And you're happy."

"Pos, Captain," the mate said flatly.

"The point is that we know who's the best! That's all we need. We don't need their primitive CAGSVIC device. We certainly don't need their cred. And recognition would only interfere with our plans. That was clear even before Sapphire came back."

"Pos, Captain."

"A few people know your captain's face, Lurin. Letting that happen was a great error that nearly resulted in disaster. Consider the fabled Ramesh Jageshwar. The most notorious slaver alive and *nobody* seems to know his looks!"

The woman turned dead egg-white eyes on her mate. She stared at him for a moment. His flat calm wavered not at all.

"Hm," she said, turning away. "You've heard all this before, of course. No matter. You're a good listener, Mate! Plenty of room for input yet. Accept it; it beats what you were before."

"I'm sure, Captain."

"Right. Take over, Lurin. Some business to be tended to . . ."

"Pos, Captain," the implacable mate said. No one heard. Even as he spoke the olive-skinned woman flickered, her outline softened, and she vanished from the con-cabin and the spaceways altogether . .

Into the Dark Universe of which the former Corundum was increasingly a part.

## 18

People say law but they mean wealth

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

To do a great right, do a little wrong.

—Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

The slight, white-haired woman twisted atop the tangled bedclothes. A sheen of sweat glowed on her naked skin. Her tensed leg muscles moved her hips against the tongue and lips caressing her loins. She crushed the tiny mounds of her chest in her own hands, both teasing and punishing them. Her fingers flicked across the engorged nipples (one of which bore a minute scar where a quartz ring had recently been removed). She moaned deep in her throat.

Between her opened legs lay a woman slightly larger and taller than she, and much larger of breast. Her tongue and teeth worked at the smaller woman's groin, lapping, lapping. The hairless pubis pressed against her jaws almost painfully.

Abruptly she ceased her oral activity and raised herself on both arms. The heavy dependage of her breasts dangled over the other woman's belly. She lowered herself and began to move up that lean body, breasts sliding over the danlii skin.

She stopped, face to face with her supine partner..

"Me too, said the one on top. "We do it together."

The slight woman opened her weighted eyes smile languidly. "Some slave you are," she said. "Oh well can't expect 'em all to be masochists Can't have every-".

She was cut off by the erect nosecone of a large soft-skinned warhead that her partner plopped unerringly into her open mouth.

"Don't need everything," that excellent breast's owner said. "I've got plenty for you, Kalahari."

The thin woman tried to giggle around her pleasant mouthful. It was removed and both women collapsed in laughter.

After a time the breasty woman turned her body around and moved back down the long lean form of her bedmate, as she had come. She arrived at her starting point, a bulge accentuated by the sharpness of the supine woman's hipbones and belly that was, in this position, actually concave. The breasty woman descended on that bulge with her clever tongue. A quiver ran through her as her partner reciprocated with an even more practiced tongue.

Groans and breathy shudders rose in the room to overwhelm the wet sounds their mouths made, and those feminine bodies writhed and squirmed, arched and pressed. Those movements grew more erratic and both women erupted in stifled screams that were almost simultaneous. The hips of the lean woman raised them both from the bed, arching as she flashed and soared for long and long. Sweating and gasping, they fell back onto the rumpled sheets and breathed ever more slowly for many minutes.

"Very nice. Wish I'd caught more of the preliminaries."

The finely-shaped woman pushed herself off her lean companion in surprise at that intruding voice. She huddled toward the far side of the bed, though she made no effort to cover herself. Her lover sat upright instantly alert.

In the middle of the room stood a raven-haired amazon in midnight blue SpraYon that started at the juncture of thigh and pelvis and extended upward barely far enough to cover the nipples of her glorious breasts. Her only other garments were thigh-high mahogany adjustaboos with redundantly high heels.

The thin woman pounced angrily from the bed and stood naked, hands on hips and eyes blazing.

"Dammit, See, how did you get in here?"

"Very quietly. How are you, Kali? Petaluma?"

"Her name's Double-P. And mine's Kalahari. Kali is for my friends."

"My apologies. Evidently your stomach has returned to normal, Double-P. Ground life does suit you best."

Double-P said nothing.

"So what are you doing here?" Kalahari demanded. "A mission. You're on call; I'm calling."

"Just like that? No warning?"

"This *is* the warning," Val said. "Ten minutes till conversion, Captain Cuw. Better get dressed."

"What's the mission?" Kalahari asked.

"Not in front of her." Val nodded toward Double-P.

"I know what you are," Petaluma Peeh said. "And that Kali's on call to TGO, though not why. As I know that TGO's behind the Race."

Val's eyebrows went up. "My, you *are* efficient. No matter. Shouldn't be much of a secret to anyone who wanted to put things together. I still won't talk about the nature of the assignment now. Come on, Kalahari."

"Not yet," Kalahari said. "There's still a condition." Valustraina See's mouth opened and her eyes went wide. A condition? You have got your old rocks back, Cap'm! Let's hear it." She waited, head cocked on one side.

"You know it," Kalahari said. "My friends are to go free. Double-P, Whitey, Pransa, Spinner. You can do it."

"Or?"

" Or no deal."

"We have other obs on you. And many, many ways of applying pressure. Including on your friends.

"Now what meller have I heard *that* line in? 'We have ways,' huh? All right. You want the old me, you got the old me. Produce your durance-viler-than-that. Kill me if you'd like! If you think you know Hellfire then you tell me if you think any of that'll.scare her. Meanwhile your mission goes begging."

Val smiled and shrugged. "You *are* the one for the job, Kalahari! I said at the outset that your friends'd be safe, didn't I? They go free. I may lie but I keep my promises. Have to, if I want to go on doing business. I've already seen to it that Whitey and Pransa gave Manjanungo the slip. They're safe back on *Rambler*. Spinner's with Cap'm Quindarissa. We'll take Double-P offplanet with us."

"Oh, Val!" Kalahari reached out, naked as she was, and hugged the TGO operative. Then she backed off, embarrassed. "Thank you. I appreciate it. I really do. But—you said Manjanungo?"

Val shook her head, grinning. "I appreciate it, too. If I weren't in such a hurry we could have a nice little sexana here. Pos, Manjanungo. He *and* Hummer are after them, still. Mangy wants credit for the capture.

"Why?" Double-P asked.

Val shrugged. "Standing in the T-SA. Among the big farming combines that are his chief customers. They're pretty shook by that raid, though it was nothing like what Ramesh Jageshwar just pulled over on the Fharreb Colony. Plus, Manjanungo has to operate under the eye of Tri-System Police and he naturally wants to them happy."

"Buy them you mean," Kalahari said. "Why doesn't TGO or TGW stop grickheads like him?"

Val flipped her fingers. "It's a *local* matter, Kalahari.

T-SA, remember? We aren't nippers. I do suspect that with Mangy-numbo it's even more a matter of honor than business. He really believes all that 'well-bred sportsman' gratshit. He was mad enough about losing the Race. Those fugitives slipping through his fingers added disaster to disgrace. In his mind his *honor's* on the line and he's probably blaming his failure on the fugitives since Emery got away clean."

"Do they know?" Double-P asked.

"I passed word to Whitey," Val told her. "Now come on, Kalahari. We've one jaunt to make before the mission. Pack a few teasers and some practical stuff and let's redshift!"

"What it comes down to," Trafalgar said, "is that you're going on this assignment with Val and you want me to come."

"Firm," Kalahari said. "She—gave me a little time to see you."

"I don't like her, you know. Oh, I admire her. She's competent and efficient, and quite fair in her own tough way. We're—just too alike, I guess," he said affectedly, his nose in the air.

Kalahari smiled wanly. "I don't know if I like her or not. I don't like What she represents and what they're doing to me. She *has* been good to my friends in return. Anyway, after this mission she's leaving my crew, even if I get a further assignment."

"That's a relief," Trafalgar said. "I could probly stand her that long if you really felt—"

"Oh, I do, Traf, truly! Double-P's leaving, too, going to Jorinne to find Spinner. Then they're going somewhere that—she wouldn't tell me about. *Home*, she said, but not Outreach, or Jarpi, or Andor."

"Hm. Home," Trafalgar said.

"Dammit, Trafalgar, it seems as if everyone I care about either disappears or chooses a different life. Stay with me for this little while."

"Hey, Kali, you're the one who chose the life of 'retired' rich Lady rather than staying with the Coalition. We had to *drag* you out of retirement during that Carnadyne Horde mess, remember?"

"Exciting!" she grinned sunnily, then went serious. "Did you feel that I had let you down? You—and the others?" Her voice sounded as if she feared his answer.

He shook his head. "Not at all, sister-woman. And—I'll consider going with you, this time. Though I'm beginning to feel—separated."

"From Quindy?"

He nodded, a little reticently.

"I know the feeling, Traf," she said, not at all ironically. "Besides," he said, "there's been this disaster on *Su mother*....."

"Oh, Trafalgar! What? Why didn't you *tell* me?"

"Well. . . the lube, you know. The disappearing lube?" (She nodded, face anxious.) "Although none of those bacteria got offship. thank Theba, they—well, Cinnabar, through no fault of its own, made a drastic error. After it had investigated the drive problems inflit, transferred the new lube, and zipped up, it went to my cabin to get a drink. From Stillwell. With some of the old lube evidently left on its clothing or someplace. There was a residue left, you know. That's how it ate up the replacement and froze up the drive. Cinnabar tried to clean it all out, but ..." He sighed.

"And?" Kalahari prompted.

"We've found out one other thing the bacteria will feed on."

"Oh, Trafalgar, no!" Her face struggled with itself.

"Pos. Stigluls. Devoured! So, no CuwStig Enterprises. I only hope it wasn't too painful...."

"Traf, I'm sor—*ree-hee!*" she managed to get out before cracking up. She didn't want to hurt his feelings, but the thought of all the recent disasters culminating in Trafalgar's private brewery being eaten by germs was too much.

He looked pained at first. As she went on he began to smile. Soon he was chortling helplessly, though rather less noisily.

"At least," she gasped, "now you have one more good reason for going to Knor again!"

"Say that's right! Flash *and* stigluls! Wanna go with me after this TGO business?"

"Sure, Trafalgar, pos," she said, still catching her breath. "Why not? On call to TGO or enslaved on a lost planet, what's the difference?"

*Lots, if you knew it wasn't really lost,* Trafalgar thought.

"Anyway," he said, "if I go back onboard with you you have to promise to protect me from Val. She's so ... *big!*"

Kalahari's eye widened in mock disbelief. "This is the man who wanted to walk on heads to get a glimpse of Setsuyo Puma's bow structure?"

"That's different. Y'see—"

"Speaking of See," Kalahari interrupted, "I've kept her waiting. Let's redshift!"

"Neg. Let her wait. All us Outies could use a little more humility, y'know."

Kalahari frowned skeptically. "More?"

Over New Punjab on Ghanj orbited Upanistation. Docked to it for refit and supply was the tramp freighter *Rambler*. An unprepossessing old ship only recently fitted with tach-

yon conversion systemry, it yet had a sizable cargo hold. Part of it had lately been remolded into quarters for freed slaves being transported to planetary havens.

That still left a fair amount of empty space. Enough for an impromptu knife-throwing range. Whitey practiced there now

As he came loping back from retrieving his dagger after a forty-meter throw in the .4 artificial gravity, the forward hatch slid open. A man in rumpled old-style nautical clothing came in. Baggy pants, a shapeless jacket and a hard-billed cap framed a nut-brown crannied face. In two strides he stood before Whitey.

"Captain Tachi," Whitey said. "You've been onplanet?"

"Aye," the captain answered. "Not as wasted a trip as I'd feared, though. It escapes me why a modern station such as this doesn't have all a spacer's needs in stock. Imagine having to go all the way down to the warehouses! But I saw Disco."

"Disco!" Whitey brightened. "Where?"

"It's working right in Refit and Supply, down below. Said it'd like to see you and Achmy and Pransa. They've already shifted down to get us all quarters."

"I'll be sure to go down soon, then. If you can spare me

"Oh, firm. And ... what after that, Mate?"

Whitey let his breath out loudly and clamped his lips tightly. He melded the dagger back onto his chest before he spoke.

"Pransa and I have been agonizing over that. You know what we feel we owe this Hummer-"

You owe as much to Khorundah, yet you never considered chasing her. Revenge is clearly not the Way, Whitey."

"I know. Chasing down one slaver for revenge for those

already dead means just that many less set free, as well. Yet I keep thinking of those this beast has not yet encountered...."

"The operative factor might be the fact that Hummer and his master still pursue you," Tachi said. "Hard to operate with pros on your tail. It may be necessary to eliminate Hummer in order to continue our work."

"Of freeing slaves," Whitey said. "Is that one with the Way?"

"Would you still be a slave? You were manumitted. Most aren't so lucky." Tachi smiled and wagged his chin toward the chest-dagger fastened to his mate's tunic. "Was Bleak where you were enslaved?"

Whitey smiled wryly. "The knife-work gave me away, hmm? Neg. I was free on Bleak. And stayed there voluntarily, right. If you can imagine that. I'd just left my first berth and thought there might be something to learn. There was."

"I never thought you wore that tackle for show."

"I neglected my training for a long time after I met you, Tachi. Now. .. it may be a useful tool in what we do. The sleeve-knife is: I shave with it!"

The two friends, master and mate, grinned at each other.

"Let's catch the next skyhook down, Whitey, and join the others before we go see Disco. Aye, I'm coming along. This old 'farer could use a little more ground time too! We'll settle the matter of our course later."

As it happened, that matter settled itself.

Manjanungo and Hummer and two others were waiting for them in their hotel mod down on Ghanj.

They held two prisoners: Achmet and Pransa.

## 19

Bloody thou art, bloody will be thy end; Shame serves thy life and doth thy death attend.

—Shakespeare, Richard III

The big Jarp wore its usual outfit of straps and studs, with one addition: a power-pak stiktited to its belt, with a ribbon cable snaking to its hand. In the hand, attached to the cable, was a plasma beamer.

It was leveled at Whitey and Tachi.

"Come in," Manjanungo said pleasantly. "Tread lightly. Hummer's a bit ... nervous. I would prefer to take you shaders onto my ship and let Hummer deal with yer there. Rather not have to explain the mess to local Seccers. I fear, however, that Hummer's passions are close to overwhelming its practicality. And it does hold the plasmer. Please try not to push it over the edge."

Whitey glanced from the face of Hummer to Manjanungo, leaning against the wall dragging at a narcostick in a holder. The Aglayan transferred his gaze to the prisoners on the couch in the corner. Cluse Famine and another of Manjanungo's crew, a Terasak with prass-hued skin and a tattooed shaved head, held stoppers on the two.

Whitey gazed into Pransa's eyes. "are you all right?"

"We are," she said, and Achmet nodded agreement.  
"Be

careful, Whitey," Pransa added, darting her eyes in Hummer's direction.

Whitey understood. Pransa had cherned the depth of malice in the outlaw.

Whitey swung his gaze back to Hummer. An ecstasy of hate showed in that orange face. Whitey stared into the squinted eyes. "Why?" he asked.

"You could have been mine," the Jarp said in low tones.

"Your capture could have been an opening for me. A step up from working for others. Instead I'm forced to turn it over to Manjanungo."

"Interesting sense of loyalty you have, Jarp," Tachi said. "You're such a good mate that when your scut of a captain crosses you, you take it out on us."

"It's a very good mate," Manjanungo said. "Surely you can appreciate that."

"So what now?" Whitey asked Manjanungo. "Wouldn't it be better for you to take us back to Andor alive? The big farmers and TSP would love to have us in their hands."

"A compromise I made with my mate." Manjanungo smiled benevolently. "A sop to its passions. Since I blocked fulfillment of Hummer's plans I am allowing it to indulge its—peculiar tastes. TSP will be disappointed, but as long as we bring them recognizable bodies. . . . You do understand that, Hummer? Leave the faces and prints intact!"

"Do you remember," Hummer said in a near-whisper, "what happened to those groundhuggers back on Andor? If you don't, let me update your data. Then let me tell you how much more I intend to do to you and your woman."

"This is all so dull," Manjanungo said, yawning. "But a deal is a deal."

Hummer began a detailed description of the horror wreaked upon the Sa'eds. Pransa sat stony-faced, her jaw

working. Achmet turned sickly pale. Even Tachi put a hand to his face, covering his mouth. Cluse swallowed more than once, hard. Only Manjanungo and the Terasak seemed unaffected. They—and one Aglayan

Whitey tuned out the Jarp's rambling, and thought.

*Hummer is very near to being out of control. That's bad—and good. Tao—no! Sunmot her and Aglii: help me. Give me of my Self and make me serene. Let me be—let me be one with your Way. Give me the strength of the willow....*

He reached down, far down inside where his Self resided. He gripped that Self and controlled it, calmed and steadied it. Prepared it. Readied himself till there was no passion, no involvement. Only what was needed for the job at hand.

He focused again on his surroundings. Serenity permeated him like a benevolent radiance. The sound of Hummer's voice returned.

"—Manjanungo says, we will take you onboard the ship before I enact all these pleasantries on you. Meanwhile you will hand over your weapons. Drop your stoppers on the floor. Opposite hands, two fingers."

Tachi and Whitey complied. Whitey reached for his chest- dagger.

"Neg." Hummer swung a long finger in a downward gesture. Whitey lowered his arm.

"I fought a Bleaker once," the Jarp said. "I can show you the scars. He no longer can. I wouldn't be at all surprised to find that you are carrying an obsidian sleeve-knife. The Bleaker I recall painfully, got his out extremely fast. Just after I'd confiscated his dagger, if I recall. So. .. either open your cuff and show me it's empty, pres!"

Whitey lowered his head, lips tight, looking defeated. His little flick of the arm was nearly invisible. The glassy

black sliver appeared in his palm. He tossed it to the floor between the two stoppers. It hit the thick carpeting without a sound.

"Firm," Hummer said. "Now the dagger—hilt-first. Hold it by the blade. Slowly.

Whitey complied, his face expressionless. His eyes stayed focused not on the deadly barrel of the plasmer but on the eyes of his enemy.

*There is no weapon, Fidmj,* his Self said to him. *There is only your Self.*

His slow-moving hand reached his chest and took the dagger by the upturned blade. A short tug broke the meld and parted the weapon from his tunic. Still slowly, he began to hand it over.

There had been no movement. There couldn't have been any movement. Yet-

Whitey's hand was extended motionless and empty, out at his side. The hilt of the Bleaker chest-dagger stood between Hummer's breasts.

*I saw nothing, Tachi thought. I was looking right at him and I swear on my ancestors he did not move!* He looked wildly around, caught the expressions on the faces of the others. No one saw it!

All this in an instant. Hummer stood like an orange pillar, madness on its face. Then it collapsed all at once as Whitey, dropping lightly to one knee and one hand, swept his booted foot out and into the Jarp's shins. As Hummer fell, its finger convulsively triggered the plasmer. The carpet smoked and blackened and curled away from the floor.

Whitey dropped flat. His hand snapped out and grabbed a fallen stopper. He twisted his body around, aimed, and Squeezed the weapon in one motion. The writhing form of the wounded Jarp stiffened, tensed. The plasma weapon fell from crabbed fingers. Out from around the base of the

dagger, tightening chest muscles forced increased flows of blood.

Whitey felt something hit his leg. He wrenched his gaze over toward the group in the corner. A stopper had struck him, knocked from Cluse's grasp by Achmet who was now grappling the Terasak for his weapon. Pransa was airborne, her target Manjanungo.

Whitey slammed his stopper between Hummer's back and the floor. The Jarp's body jammed the weapon on and continued helplessly to receive its beam. Hummer lay like a corpse, though open-eyed and bleeding.

Whitey grabbed Cluse's stopper and nipped up to his feet. He had heard Pransa land hard on Manjanungo. Now the pirate was on top. The small woman had been unable to get a hold on him. He moved like a slim snake, impossible to grapple. He also struck—effectively, Whitey could see.

He saw too that Cluse had joined the Terasak in pounding Achmy. Dialing his stopper to Stun, Whitey sought an opening, a chance to pin one of the slavers in its beam without hitting his friend. None came.

He charged in instead. Grabbing Cluse by one shoulder he wrenched her backward and threw her to the carpet. She stayed there, with no heart for this fight.

The Terasak, meanwhile, had broken free. Now he stood, stopper leveled at Whitey and Achmy. Whitey's own weapon pointed downward. For a static moment they stood, tensed.

"Don't, son," a quiet voice said from behind Whitey.

The Terasak looked over the Aglayan's shoulder, indecision playing over his face. He saw Tachi, plasma beamer in hand. The power-pak was in Tachi's other hand, the ribbon cable looping across his midsection. The Terasak stared into the plasmer's snout.

"Three of us, son," Tachi said. "One of you. You shoot one, we shoot one. Bad odds."

The confused Terasak blinked, trembled—and dropped his stopper.

Whitey immediately turned to Pransa and Manjanungo, just in time to see the short woman's powerful Aglayan leg drive a knee into the slaver's gut from where she lay beside him. As the black-clad man grunted and sought breath she rolled away from him and came to her feet in a fluid motion. Whitey and Tachi now covered all three of their opponents.

Whitey turned to Tachi. "Thanks—I guess!"

His captain grinned. "I guessed too. I guessed he wouldn't call that bluff!"

Achmy flitted about gathering up stoppers and knives. Gingerly he extracted the stopper from beneath the Jarp, his arm outstretched to its limits. He dialed it off. The exhausted and dying Hummer sank back in a heap.

"You want to Poof that, boy," Tachi said softly to Whitey. "Mercy demands, even with its like. And—we don't want a body on our hands!"

Whitey stared at the long orange form. He strode to its side and stood looking down. Once more the eyes of the two mates met.

"It is in my heart to do more to you than this, demon," Whitey said. "Think of a family on Andor as the light fades for you. Farewell! You are worthy of nothing."

Before the astonished eyes of the room's other occupants the Aglayan spacefarer lifted a booted foot and set it atop the hilt of the protruding Bleaker dagger. Slowly, rock-steadily, he settled his weight onto the foot. Smoothly the blade sank into the Jarp's breast between leather straps.

Hummer's face watched death invade its body with an expression not of pain but of horror and disbelief. For a moment. Then a fresh spurt of blood, a shudder—and its lips rolled back from its teeth, its eyes vised shut in agony. A whistling shriek came from its twisted mouth, both its

Jarp and its Galactic voices venting the despair of mortal agony.

A last heavy shove and the blade was in to the hilt. The Jarp was reduced to a watery gurgling. Whitey stepped back and dialed his stopper. Squeezed.

The form of the Jarp seemed to shimmer diffusely. Then it was gone, its place taken by slightly-glowing particles that settled slowly to the carpet, like dust motes riding sunbeams in late afternoon.

"No body, Tachi," Whitey said, releasing the pressure on his weapon and dialing it back to Two.

Achmy stepped over and retrieved the dagger from the carpet. Something akin to awe showed on his face. He saw that the blade was clean of blood. Somehow that made him even more eager to get rid of it.

"How. . . ?" he asked, handing it to Whitey.

"It's a well-kept secret," his friend said. "that Bleakers learn to throw knives as well as fight with them."

"I've seen you throw, but never like that," the small man said. "Besides, you're no Bleaker!"

"Call me a son of a Bleaker, then." Whitey smiled fondly at his friend. "Just be sure you're buying the next round when you do!"

"Whitey," Tachi said. "We're going to have to decide what to do with this scum. I know what you'd like to do to Manjanungo...."

"Firm. I won't kill him in cold blood, though."

"Then who do we turn him over to?" Pransa asked.

"Ah, that's the difficulty," Tachi said. "These stinkers have done nothing provably illegal here on Ghanj . We however, may have. I think we need not worry about our:— activities in the T-SA. Extradition is rather arbitrary along the spaceways. There's nothing in Ghanji law to say we're fugitives."

"We have killed someone," Whitey said. "In a closed room. Meaning the nipper may be able to analyze the dust particles and prove it."

"Not *someone*," Pransa muttered. "A monster!"

"Aye," Tachi said. "And we can't prove that Hummer and his captain captured us first."

"My oh my," Manjanungo smirked. "What a dilemma!"

"Seems to me you people could use a little adjudication," a voice said from the doorway, and Whitey and Achmy whirled with stoppers leveled.

"Easy with those things," Valustriana See said, with an ironic smile. Ducking her head and muttering something about "Ghanji midgets," she entered the room. Behind her came Trafalgar and Kalahari Cuw.

Valustriana straightened her exceptional figure and gazed equably at them. "You surely know who my employer is, by now. Just don't include me with those nippers you were worried about. I don't know anyone who has any interest in prosecuting for the death of Hummer." She raised her thick black brows at the dowdy woman standing forlornly at Manjanungo's side. "Cluse Fameline, isn't it? Didn't we take a jaunt together once? You're slumming a bit, Admiral!"

"We do what we have to, See, not what we would."

"Oh, beautiful speech, Fameline. Anyhow Captain, ah, Tachi, I don't expect 'Janungo, here—"

"Please," the black-taffeta'd man said in a pained voice.

"—pardon me, Mangy, then—I don't expect a prizewinning captain wants to testify as to how a few microscopic components of a particularly vicious murderer got themselves scattered over this carpet." Her shrug drew manY gazes to her remarkable chest.

Trafalgar smiled at Whitey. "Competent sort, aren't you? We'd have intervened, but you sure didn't need any help.

"And if I hadn't done what I did?"

Trafalgar's boyish smile persisted "Chances are that these people would've been waylaid in the usually-safe streets of New Punjab as they hustled their prisoners back to *Ruy Diaz*."

Pransa smiled and nodded. "We appreciate that," she said matter-of-factly. She had liked this charming man ever since he had come onboard *Disc & Bud*. She *chermed* friendship and sincerity from him, and always had.

"And now?" Tachi asked the statuesque woman from TGO.

"Now, with thanks, 'Don Arcibo' is my prisoner."

"Ah," Tachi said nodding, "good."

"Good indeed," Whitey said. "This posturing slaver *ordered* or sanctioned the brutal murders of three of our friends and was ready for Hummer to do the same to us. He—"

"Oh, there's even more than that," Val See told him. "Would someone please use something or other to link his hands behind his back?"

Manjanungo drew himself up imperiously. "No such disgraceful disrespect to my person is necessary! I—"

"Shut that hole in your face, pirate. Ah, thank you," she said as Achmy accepted Trafalgar's black sash and stepped behind the slaver. "And put your hands back!" Val rapped, hard.

"So much for his future," Whitey said, not without misgivings. "What about ours?"

Valustriana shrugged again, saw the effect that produced, and smiled. "A big bad vicious gang of slave-raiders. I should point out that Warmaug Jaranit was just as much a law-abiding citizen as the Sa'eeds."

"A slaveholder!" Pransa said indignantly.

"Quite legal on Andor," Valustriana pointed out. "Not a *nice* fellow, of course. Your turning loose all those locusts, now—that endangered a large population. You are warned. I urge you to consider all the innocents you put into danger

by your actions. The Sa'eeds are dead because of you, for instance. *No, wait,*" she said, as Whitey opened his mouth to protest. "I made a promise to a friend of yours." She indicated Kalahari with a nod. "You are all free to go. TGO does keep its promises—and even if it did not, I am a *person*, and I do."

She studied their troubled faces. "Look, we deal in balances. Your activities do no real harm to the social order. You even provide a bit of counterweight, and help the mental attitudes of a lot of slaves who know that you and— others, are trying. You help them dream. Meanwhile, understand that you're on your own with any local policers. We can't be bothered noticing your activities—just don't try building a fleet. That challenges peace along the space- ways, and us. In a way, you and Manjanungo here are in the same category. No great harm to anyone. Just minor criminals." She stared satirically into Tachi's eyes.

"Manjanungo . . . is a," Whitey said, choking on the words, "minor criminal ... and I am?"

Watching the tall woman nod while wearing a perfectly composed face, Pransa said, "And what about Ramesh Jageshwar?"

"Let's don't get into litanies," Valustriana said. She smiled and aimed a finger. "I can tell you this, though—you bring in Ramesh Jageshwar and you'll be rewarded!" She and Manjanungo departed. Watching Whitey stare, Trafalgar Cuw pointed at the plasma beamer.

Whitey turned to Manjanungo, who looked quite stiff with his wrists bound behind him. "You're lucky, swine. Today you escaped a vengeful man. Cross my path again and I'll commit another minor crime that will not get me nipped." The fingers of his left hand flexed its armored Bleaker glove.

The pirate/slaver/sportsman swallowed, staring into the eyes of the pale-skinned man who was a soccerer with a knife.

"Easy," Val See told them both. "Cluse, and you, whatever your name is from Terasaki—*git*." She gestured at the doorway with her thumb and watched the two exit with alacrity. Drawing her stopper, she turned back to Manjanungo.

"Joser, I can escort you from here as cargo or you can cooperate and save lots of hassle. Want to walk nicely? After all, I'm *rescuing* you from a *vengeful man*."

Shoulders back as much from his own carriage as from the bonds on his wrists, the man in black taffetas moved to the door. Whitey stared him there, all the way.

"Right then," Valustriana said. "Please do try to be careful, you freers of slaves. Kalahari—see you onboard in a few?" She received a nod, and nodded in return. "Mangynungo . do walk first, won't you? *Move out*, you disgrace to a proud family!"

She and Manjanungo departed. Watching Whitey stare, Trafalgar Cuw pointed at the plasma beamer.

"Captain Tachi: possession of a plasmer on Ghanj you can get nipped for! The jails are better than many, but they're still jails. 'Always walk away from a mess,' that's my motto. This week."

As Tachi nodded and moved, Trafalgar touched the sleeve of the man called Whitey, who was still staring at the doorway through which Manjanungo had "escaped" him.

"Uh, Whitey. . . revenge drives too many people along the spaceways, Janja included. It hasn't made her happier and it won't you. Look, you've got a pretty free hand with what you're doing—right now. Cause another mess like this and your nuisance quotient may be too high for TGO to ignore. *Please* forget what she said about Jageshwar, or any other really big-time slaver or slaveowner. You can't affect the institution, Whitey."

The Aglayan nodded unhappily. "I see that."

"Good. I'd like to see you and Pransa safe. By the way, there's something I've always wondered about—what in hell do Bleakers wear those armored gloves for?"

"Bleakers are good with knives. An armored glove can block a knife."

"Ah—defense!" Then turning his head to one side, Trafalgar asked, "Only?"

"I didn't say that."

"Right. Look up *`cestus*,' if you don't already know the word. Old one. I've an idea you don't need the glove. A hyper-competent man like you, with a stopper and two knives."

"I also didn't say there were only two knives." The two men grinned at each other.

"I'm sure the fact that I like you is a so-what to you, Whitey. As to knives—we all have our little secrets!" Grinning, Trafalgar eased over to Kalahari and slipped an arm across her shoulders. "Time to redshift, sister-woman. Captain; Pransa; Whitey: be careful."

"Cool winds to thee, Trafalgar Cuw," Pransa said.

"And to thee, Captain," Whitey said to Kalahari. "You are worthy of Aglaya, both of you."

Kalahari swallowed, staring at him with clouded eyes. "Traf and I both know what that means," she said huskily. "Please know how much it means, to us." She hesitated, then turned to go.

Trafalgar stopped in the doorway, brow furrowed. He turned back. "Whitey. ..." He hesitated, ran his lip through his teeth. "Whitey—you didn't really inform on Janja, did you?"

Whitey's astonished face showed that he had no idea what the Outie meant. "Of course not! I would never—"

Trafalgar's face cleared. "Thanks Whitey! I'll pass the word." With a satisfied nod he tossed a casual wave at the

crew of Rambler, and departed. The door slid shut after him.

Frowning, Whitey took a step toward it.

"Don't bother, my boy," Tachi said. "He wouldn't answer. He knows something, but—well. He isn't just extraordinary, he's as close-mouthed as that giant of a TGO agent. Be grateful that he's a friend."

## 20

The mere vagrant lust of seeing things and going places.

—Albert Jay Nock

"Valustriana isn't expecting us back onboard until after I've hired on a new crew," Kalahari said. "Want to help me? With any luck we can find an all-female crew that'll keep us both amused while we suffer through this business." She showed Trafalgar a leering smile.

"Kali—"

"Won't Val go into a purple heebie when she finds out you're coming? I was promised a free hand in hiring, though."

"Kalahari—I said I'd think about it. I have. I'm going back onto *Sunmother*."

Tears stood in her eyes as she whirled to face him. "Damn you anyhow, Trafalgar Pew! You come on my ship when it pleases you but I can't even get this one favor in return?"

"Right," he said, but relented. "I'm sorry, Kalahari. Really. She doesn't have anything on me and I'll be damned if I'm going on a TGO mission with that—amazon. Besides, there's a ship I belong on."

She turned away. "Kali, listen. I want to persuade the rest of the Coalition to go back to Knor. Some more stigluls . . . some more gauds."

She turned to stare at him. She shook her head in some wonder "Boy, I could use some more of that ready Knorese gaud a lot more'n you! Delventine, remember? And third prize wasn't that much. I might be persuaded to go along with you—this time we'd be *ready* for those woman-stompers. Whyncha come along with me now—work on me?"

"Because working on you to get you to go along isn't necessary. I think the others may be harder to convince, see, and—"

Trafalgar!" Kalahari cut him off, putting her hands on his shoulders. "It's Quindy, isn't it? You miss Quindy!"

"I *told* you: I am not going on any TGO mission—not with that great skyscraper of a woman or anyone else." He looked away. "Right. I miss Quindy."

She still preferred to ignore the first part. "All right, Traf. I can live with that. Listen—once that 'skyscraper of a woman' and TGO are done with me, I have to find *something* to do. Hold off on the run to Knor until ... later?"

"Absolutely," Trafalgar Cuw said, and he grinned. "Absolutely!" He made a move toward her, paused, cocked his head on one side to show her the boyishly ingenuous grin she knew. "Uh, I was about to hug you. Think that's safe?— after all, we have a lot in common. We both love women."

The former Captain Hellfire hugged him, laughing and leaking tears.

Then he was gone, and she leaked some more tears, and waited for Valustriana See, and waited. .. and waited. She might have been waiting still, if she hadn't done some checking Val See was missing. So was Manjanungo. And his Ship.

Whitey stared at Pransa, who sat disconsolately on the couch where so recently she had been a prisoner. "It's hard not to feel discouraged, isn't it," he said dully.

"At what?" Tachi asked. "At the idea that we aren't going to stop slavery? That's never been news. Because TGO knows all about us? So what—they don't *care*! Or is it that we're feeling a bit grandiose and hate having our secret and mighty plans spoiled? Not the mysterious heroes anymore, is that it? *Listen!* Our original intent—to aid individuals is unchanged.

"I've lost a lotta cred," Achmy said softly, "getting into this crusade with you. It wasn't *my* crusade. I just went along with my captain 'n' my crewmates. I—guess I hoped you'd get over it and we could get back to haulin' freight, makin' a livin'. Well—I see different. The fact that slavery's a *part* of society and TGO protects society, including slavery...that doesn't mean a grat's ass to the individual slave, does it."

Whitey and Pransa looked at each other, and smiled. They glanced at Tachi, and back to Achmet.

"The Famous Raiders of Andor," Pransa said. "Sounds like an Akima Mars thriller, doesn't it!" She slapped her knees and rose to her feet. "Well. We may not make such profit, Achmy, but I'm happy to tell you that we'll manage

"Aglii's mercy—that lawyer Lizina mentioned!" Whitey said.

Pransa nodded. "Yemahl Huhleem, of Panish. Done! I didn't spend all my idle Race hours practicing knifework with you—I made a longcall to Panish. Everything is set! He'd already heard from Lizina. We *dangerous minor criminals* are now on an expense account!"

"Dorian and Lizina got away then," Whitey burst out.

"Absolutely. Furthermore Yemahl informed me that Andor is their last operation due to the fact that she's pregnant!"

Whitey stared. "She carried a baby through that raid?!"

"Firm," she said, positively glowing at him.

"Uh\_what say we, uh, remember that we aren't safe from local nippers," Achmy reminded, "and get away from this room with its, uh Jarp crumbs."

Excellent idea," Tachi said. "Crew:let us redshift."

As Tachi and Achmet led the way out the door, Whitey leaned close to Pransa.

"Did Dorjan know she was carrying a child during that raid?"

"So I assume. They're a lot like us—they work together."

"I would never have allowed you to—"

"I think no one *allows* Lizina to do anything, love. She—"

"Right, firm. But if we had a child coming, Pransa . . ." "As I said, they're a lot like us. Or we're a lot like them. And we do have."

Walking down the corridor, Whitey frowned. "Have what?"

"Have a child coming."

"Pransy!" His voice was almost a shout, so that Tachi and Achmy turned back. "You—we . . . during the Race?— during the raid too?"

"Uh. Finn. I just didn't want to worry or distract you."

Whitey stopped and put his arms around her, drawing her close. "Didn't want to—I ought to punch you!"

"What, in my condition?"

He laughed in true delight, and hugged her. "Later, maybe. After our child is born, Pransahilodial . . . Promised."

"Whi—Fidnij You mean. . . ?"

"If you will, Pransa, Beloved."

She pressed her smiling face hard to his. "That question needs no answer, my Beloved. . . my Promised. And—" She paused, tugging back enough to look into his face with damp eyes.

He was smiling. "And—"

"And this child back enough to look into his face with

"and this child will be worthy of Aglaya!"