

TRADING RUN

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"Breakout." the First Mate said.

The muscular tension and pressure which accompanied the shift from transligh to sublight speed washed over the crew of the *Wanderer*, leaving the momentary queasiness in the stomach that space travelers called "shift nausea." Captain Raphael Santos swallowed once to calm his stomach and scanned the console in front of him, checking the condition of the ship after the change from one drive to another.

His eyes had not even traveled halfway across the board when he heard the word "doctor" groan from the intercom speaker. He didn't have to look at the indicator light on the communications panel to know the call had come from Prince Rissling's cabin. He reached over and flipped the switch for the Prince's cabin.

"Did you want the doctor. Your Highness?"

"Yes, you dolt," Prince Rissling's voice gasped from the console.

Rafe Santos held back a sharp reply to his employer, but he didn't know how much longer he could keep himself from talking back to the Prince. He tried to explain to the Prince for the thousandth time that the crew was too busy during the transligh breakout to cater immediately to his Royal needs.

"Quickly," the Prince complained. "Your sloppy piloting has made me sick, as usual."

Rafe switched off the intercom before he said something which would damage the already tenuous relationship between himself and the Prince. He was not used, as the commander of an independent trading ship, to being talked to in the manner the Prince was using,

but it had become necessary for the ship's survival as a trader of any sort for him to swallow some of his pride and prerogative as Captain.

"I have a green board. Sir. Ready to establish parking orbit around the planet," the First Mate informed him.

"Very well, Mr. Johnson, proceed." Rafe replied.

Rafe's dark eyes looked into the screen that showed the view below the ship as it approached the planet. He saw the blue gem that was ancient Earth. It was a sparkling, azure jewel, swirled with the white impurities of clouds; beautiful despite its age.

"Will there be ground time for the crew on the planet, Sir?"

"I'm afraid not. Mr. Johnson. This landing will be all business. We will only need a small party to bring the equipment and supplies aboard. I have been informed by the Prince that he doesn't wish to see the crew 'wandering around like a bunch of cattle' like they did at our last stop on Carthage.

"I'll tell the Prince we are ready to begin communication with the planet," Rafe said. "Then we can start the search for the supplies."

"Yessir," the First Mate replied.

Rafe caught the small hint of humor and sympathy in the Mate's voice and he smiled slightly himself. He took one last look at the planet of man's ancient birth. Normally he considered blue to be a cold color, but the blue of Earth seemed warm and inviting to him.

"Perhaps," he thought, "it's only inviting compared to the chill I feel in my own ship."

He reflexively bent his six foot height as he went through the hatch to the lower decks. The lack of ground time for his men wasn't the only change that had been made in the normally informal routine of the

ship.

The opportunities for an independent trader to make a profit, or even a stable living, had been diminishing in the last few years. The sphere of occupied planets had stabilized. As expansion slowed to a crawl and stopped, the emphasis for most planets shifted to stabilizing what was essentially a frontier atmosphere in the colonized galaxy.

Large fleets of ships from the older and more established worlds had moved into the trading marketplace lately and they were forcing the independents out. Commerce between the stars was no longer a business for a few brave men with a little money and cunning; it was a controlled and systemized business now.

The *Wanderer* had managed to stay in the trading business because of Rafe's skill. They had made a few trips dealing in luxury goods and novelty items, but even those markets were drying up as the more efficient fleets of the big planets expanded their operations. After the last less-than-successful trip, Rafe realized that all his skill as a trader would not keep the men of the *Wanderer* in space. They would have to go in a new direction or be forced out of space altogether.

Since the choices were limited, it was an easy selection to make. The crew agreed that the ship should align itself with one of the smaller feudal worlds and become the "trading fleet" for the world.

As he walked toward the Prince's cabin, Rafe could remember the day he had signed the contract with the Royal Family of Newcastle. The Prince, acting for his family, was seated on his throne, plump, purple and pompous. He had turned his cold eyes to Captain Santos and informed him that the crew was too "sociable" and from now on a strict consciousness of rank and position would be observed. He also told Rafe that the Royal Family would select the trade goods to be carried on the trip and those goods would remain the Prince's secret. The Prince made sure the Captain realized he would be little more than a chauffeur on this trading run.

Rafe knocked on the door to the cabin which had once been his own and waited for permission to enter.

"You may come in," said a petulant whine from within.

The short, paunchy form of Crown Prince Augustus Rissling reclined on the cabin's bunk, his hands clutched to his ample belly as if to hold everything inside. The doctor was bent over the Prince administering a shot that would calm the nausea in the Royal stomach. Rafe suppressed a smile when he saw the doctor had anticipated the call for assistance.

The Prince tried to rise from his bed and address Rafe, but he fell back with a groan before speaking. "I thought I told you to have your engines checked, Captain. Something is making me sick every time we shift across the light barrier."

The doctor packed his equipment and left the cabin, shaking his head slightly as he passed Rafe.

"I've had the engineer check again, Your Highness, and everything is working perfectly. Some physical discomfort is normal as a part of the operation of the Chaytor Drive. I'm afraid we all have to live with it."

"Well, I don't," the Prince snapped. "Have him check the engines again."

The Prince had been growing more animated in relating his discomfort, but he stopped moving suddenly and groaned.

"Well," Rissling snapped. when he had sufficiently recovered, "what else did you want besides the opportunity to see me suffer?"

"We have established a parking orbit around Earth. I wanted to inform you we could make contact with Earth Communications Control and begin negotiations for your supplies anytime you desire."

"When I feel better, I'll tell them what I want and they can ship it up to me."

"I believe we'll have to make a planet landing to trade, Your Highness. From the information I gathered on Carthage, Earth doesn't have the capability of transporting materials from the planet to transfer in orbit."

"I thought this was supposed to be the birthplace of man," the Prince said. "How can they operate

under such primitive conditions?"

"Since the exodus was centuries ago, I would suspect the planet doesn't have enough trained personnel to maintain a transfer and cargo facility in orbit, Prince Rissling."

"Primitive. They probably won't even appreciate the value of the trade goods I brought. And you haven't had any dealings with the natives before?"

"No, Your Highness, I've never been this far out before. My information comes from another trader I met on Carthage. He made a deal here for some salvaged equipment about three standard years ago. He said the trading was good."

"What did he mean by 'good.' Captain?"

"He got the material he needed at a reasonable price. It wasn't the most modern equipment available, but he couldn't afford to pay what one of the larger worlds would want for the material."

"I don't suppose he said what he was trading for and what he paid for it?" the Prince inquired.

"No, Your Highness. Those are things one trader doesn't volunteer and questions another trader doesn't ask."

"I had heard you traders were a tight-mouthed bunch before I hired you, Captain. I know you don't talk much to outsiders, but if you won't tell each other anything what do you traders talk about?" the Prince asked sarcastically.

"We can discuss a lot of subjects without giving away secrets," Rafe answered mildly. "We exchange information which might be useful."

"Like where the natives can be cheated?"

"No, Prince Rissling. Information about planet wars or shifts in the political structure of a planet or region or technical information that might lead to a trade. On Carthage. for example, I learned about some breakthrough research being conducted in the area of providing power to a planet from its sun. There's an experimental satellite drawing power from the star in the Carthage system and broadcasting it to a station on one of the moons."

"What good is information like that?"

"It tells me that Carthage is a closed market for energy producing equipment if this experimental system becomes practical. It gives me a source of information on energy research that might be valuable to another planet. Every scrap of information can be useful if you know how or where to use it."

"I don't see why people should take all that time to learn how to suck energy from a star when there's plenty of fossil fuel and radioactive ores in the ground."

"It's not inexhaustable, Your Highness. Different planets have different resources. You have to understand that as a trader: what a planet needs and what it will take in exchange. Like what I learned about Earth on Carthage. The trader I talked to said that Earth would accept trade goods instead of hard currency. That will allow us to trade here where we couldn't on Carthage."

The Prince didn't speak at Rafe's mild rebuke of his Royal trading methods, but harumphed to himself. Rissling had been sure he would be able to make any deal he wanted with the trade goods he had stored so secretly in the hold of the *Wanderer*, but the dealers on Carthage had only been interested in galactic hard currency as payment for their goods.

The Prince fumbled around inside his tunic and produced a sheet of paper which he shoved in Rafe's direction.

"Go talk to someone in authority down there. Tell them what I want. When I feel better we will discuss payment."

The Prince groaned again and rolled over to face the wall of the cabin. Rafe cut off a second moan by closing the hatch as he left the cabin.

As he walked along the trail up the mountain from the landing field, Rafe could hear the Prince

puffing heavily some ten yards ahead of him. As he had on Carthage, Augustus Rissling had decided it was his Royal duty and right to lead the trading party on this expedition and now he was struggling under the stress of unaccustomed exercise. Rafe only hoped the result of Rissling's leadership would not bring the same dismal results it had on their previous trading stop.

It was a small band that traveled from the field on the mountain plateau up the trail to the salvage yard to bargain for the material the monarchy on Newcastle needed. Rafe had brought along First Mate Johnson and the new Third Mate, Jacob Robison, who had joined the crew on Carthage when Mr. Phillips had decided to retire. It would give him the opportunity to break in Mr. Robison to his normal duties as the newest member of the trading ship's officer cadre. The Prince was the last member of the party.

Rafe was studying his surroundings as they journeyed up the path. Something didn't look right about the setup here, but he couldn't put his finger on what it was. The landing field had looked cracked and broken as the ship made its approach to the surface. But when the trading party had left the ship and started to the salvage yard, he could see the field wasn't in as bad a condition as he had estimated from the air. The field almost looked like someone wanted it to appear abandoned and broken down.

"Mr. Johnson, what would be your evaluation of this landing field?"

"A mess, sir. Coming in it looked like no one had been here in years. It makes me think the people who run this place don't know what they're doing."

"What does all that tell you about the trading possibilities?"

"Well," the mate speculated, "if they have what we want, I would think we could get it at a very good price. It should be very easy."

"Yes," Rafe agreed, "that's the first impression I got, but it's backwards. At a distance objects usually look better because the flaws are hidden. Why does this area look better close up than it does from far away?" He turned directly to the mate and asked, "Did you notice that large crater on the landing apron the other side of where we set the ship down?"

"Not close up, Sir. I was just glad we missed it when we landed."

"It wasn't a crater. Mr. Johnson. It was a burn mark on the surface like a chemical rocket had taken off. No one has used chemical rockets in recent history. That kind of mark would have been repaired years ago. It seems like someone has made that mark specially to look like a crater. I wonder why someone would go to all that trouble to make this place look like it's on its last legs?"

"I'm sorry, Sir. I should have noticed something like that."

"Don't feel bad, Mr. Johnson. I probably wouldn't have noticed it myself if I hadn't been in a suspicious frame of mind. Nothing on this trip has been normal and it has put me in a cautious condition."

At the top of the hill the Prince gasped to a stop and stared at the decaying area that was the salvage yard. Robison was right behind the Prince and almost bumped into him when he stopped suddenly. The First Mate and Rafe arrived a moment later.

Before the group a sagging chain metal fence stretched for a hundred yards in either direction. The links of the chain seemed more rust than solid metal, and all along its length sections of the fence had been repaired with an assortment of sheet metal scraps, wire, and boards.

The entrance to the fenced yard was directly ahead of the group and a small, run-down shack stood to one side of the opening just inside the gate. The gate itself had fallen from its hinges some time in the distant past, by the look of it. One day it had opened, had parted company with its hinges and to this moment continued to lie fully open in a heap of rusting pipe and chain metal.

Over the gate opening a large, faded sign proclaimed to all who entered that this establishment contained:

THE FINEST
RECYCLED MECHANISMS
IN THE GALAXY

At one time the sign would have been called gaudy, shouting in its offensively red letters, but years and weather had toned down the shout to a mere yell.

In smaller letters near the bottom, the sign told everyone the operator of this pile of decaying junk was:

Moses Harrison
Authorized Planet Salvage Dealer

Through the open gate. Rafe could see that a large area of the yard was filled with big, unidentifiable lumps covered with a variety of heavy cloth and plastic sheets. Each pile had a number and letter combination painted on it which must have served as an organizing system at one time, but from the disorganized look of the place Rafe doubted that even the man named as operator could now tell what was contained in the yard.

Under the edge of the covering on the nearest pile he could see bent and rusting metal sticking out and knew the contents of the stack would be useless to anyone, but he remembered the strange condition of the landing field and reserved judgment on what kind of a deal he might be able to make here.

"What a mess!" the Prince grunted. "I'll never find what I want here." He surveyed the yard with a scowl on his brow and his nose wrinkled like he had encountered some bad smell. "What a garbage heap! And where's the cretin who inhabits this mess?"

"I'll find him, Sire," the Third mate said, starting into the yard.

"I don't think a search will be necessary, Mr. Robison," the Captain said, pointing to a sign on the front of the shack. It requested them to "ring for service." An arrow had been painted on the sign directing potential customers to a button at the bottom which, at one time, had been white, but now was an ancient shade of yellow approaching mustard. It seemed crusted over with undisturbed dirt.

Mister Robison walked over to the front of the building with all the confidence he could muster after not having seen the sign until it was pointed out to him. He pushed the button and the facade of confidence was shattered as he jumped when the loud, raspy horn sounded.

From the rear of the yard a large man in heavily patched, dirty coveralls emerged from between two of the covered piles of junk. He was a shaggy bear of a man with longish hair, a full beard, and a lumbering gait. His movements suggested he had been taught to walk correctly once, but his training was poorly remembered.

The big man approached the gate wiping his hands on a scrap of cloth, cleaning away the grime of whatever he had been working on.

"Howdy, folks. What ken I get fer ya?"

"Master Moses Harrison?" the Captain inquired.

"Yep," the big man replied. He seemed surprised by the formality of Rafe's question, and extended his hand toward the Captain.

"I'm Captain Raphael Santos," Rafe said, shaking the big man's hand. "This," the Captain continued, indicating the Prince, "is Crown Prince Augustus Rissling—"

"Give him the list," the Prince snapped.

Harrison stared at the Prince, appraising Rafe out of the corner of his eye all the time. His face looked blank of expression to Rafe, but the activity of his eyes told Rafe the big man was sizing up the situation.

Rafe introduced the rest of the group as he reached into his tunic and produced the shopping list for the expedition. He passed it to Harrison who studied it in detail for a minute.

"Reckon I ken get this," he said, looking up from the list. "Leastwise most of it."

"Well, be quick about it," the Prince said. "I don't want to spend any more time in this garbage dump than is necessary."

Rafe cringed at the remark.

"Not a garbage dump," Moses said mildly, "salvage yard. Differ'nt thing altogether."

Rafe stepped forward hastily to prevent any further strain in the meeting. "I'm sure the Prince didn't mean to say anything that would offend, Master Harrison."

Behind Rafe the Prince snorted.

"We would like to strike a bargain which is beneficial to us both and to trade for the items on this list," Rafe continued.

Harrison looked at the paper again, checking off each item as he slowly went down the list. "Most o' the spare parts fer the groun' effeck vehicles er easy 'nuf." He moved down the list reacting positively to each item as he checked it off. "Microfilm labrary's no problem at all. This here Mark XXV computer's pretty scarce tho'. Gonna set ya back a bunch."

"How much," the Prince interrupted suspiciously.

Harrison looked over the list one last time. Rafe could almost see the slow adding up his mind was making as he figured the price of each item.

"Fer the whole lot . . . fifty kilos of power plant grade radioactives."

"Robbery," screamed the Prince.

Rafe swung around to quiet the Prince and he could see Harrison taking a step back in fear. The big man raised his hands to try and stop the flood of sputtering that was coming from the Prince's mouth.

"I'm sure we can come to some kind of agreement," Rafe said over his shoulder. He was standing between the Prince and Harrison, trying to make himself the focus of the big man's attention. "I have a variety of trade goods from Newcastle in the ship. If you'd tell me just what you needed, I'm sure there's something we can use as an exchange medium."

"Radioactives," Harrison said stubbornly. "Er the same amoun' in hard galactic currency."

"Ridiculous," the Prince yelled.

"Take it er leave it," Harrison said. "Won' get no better deal on them big colony worlds. Mark XXV's an old model. Not too many made ~foreevery'n' hightailed it off Earth."

The Prince continued to sputter through Harrison's explanation, but as Harrison finished speaking he calmed and told Rafe he wished to leave.

"Mister Robison, accompany the Prince back to the ship. Mister Johnson and I will be along directly."

The Third Mate nodded and assumed a position two steps behind the Royal bulk as he started back to the ship.

Rafe was thinking about the trade as he watched Augustus Rissling trek back down the hill. The price Harrison was asking would not be the best bargain he had ever made, but it was not overly high considering the rarity of the items he was seeking.

"'Citable fella," Harrison remarked about the retreating Prince.

"I'll need some time to consider your offer and perhaps make changes in my selections," Rafe said.

"Take all 'a time ya need. Ain't goin' nowhere."

Rafe nodded and asked, "Until then, I need to restock perishable foodstuffs and some other items on my ship. Could you tell me where I can go to complete my resupply?"

"Ken handle it here," Harrison said. "Got a list?"

Rafe reached inside his tunic again and handed the supply list to the big man. "When can I take delivery of these things?" he asked.

"Have em fer ya in the momin'."

"That will be fine. We can also complete a deal for the other items then. Will that be satisfactory to you?"

"Reckon."

Rafe and his First Mate slowly walked back down the mountain. The Captain was in no hurry to

face the Prince.

When he got back to the ship, Rafe could tell the atmosphere was decidedly on the cold side. He was greeted formally by one of his crew and informed the Prince wanted to see him immediately.

"Come in," the Prince snapped from inside the cabin when Rafe knocked.

He was barely in the cabin before the Prince started his tirade.

"We will not deal with that cretin, Captain. Find someone else to supply our needs."

"That's not possible, Your Highness."

"Anything I want done will be done, Captain."

"He's the only salvage dealer on the planet."

"What do you mean 'the only one'?"

"He is the only man the planetary government has authorized to deal in salvage."

"Junk, you mean," the Prince snuffed "I'm sure they don't view it that way, Your Highness. Besides, it's what you came here to bargain for."

"Just get the things I want from that man, Captain."

"Can I get the radioactives from the trade goods you stored?"

"I don't have anything like that in the hold. Take it from the ship's supplies," the Prince snapped.

"I can't do that, Your Highness."

"I told you to do it," the Prince yelled.

"You don't have the authority, Prince Rissling. Our contract gives you the services of the ship and crew. You also have control of the trade goods you provide, but you can't dispose of any items of equipment or supplies which are a part of my ship."

"Captain, you were engaged to get the material I need and I expect you to do, and use, whatever is necessary to obtain those things. If you fail in this, you can expect to suffer grave consequences. I will make sure no one in the galaxy deals with you again."

The Prince had purpled with rage as he yelled and he sat back now to gain his breath and watch the Captain shake with fear at his threat.

Rafe disappointed the Prince.

"I'll make the best deal I can with Harrison," the Captain said calmly, "but remember, since I'm using supplies which belong to this ship, the things I trade for are mine. You and I will have to strike a separate deal of our own later."

"You are working for me. What you get in trade is mine and the Monarchy's. Are you trying to cheat me and break the contract?"

"The contract is very specific at your own insistence. You pay only our salaries for the use of the ship and for the perishable supplies expended in such missions as you undertake. Everything else is my responsibility. I'm using material you wanted no part of replacing, so what I get in trade is mine."

"Insolent oaf!"

A small, thin smile lingered on the corners of Rafe's mouth. "Perhaps, Your Highness, but at the moment the only oaf who can get what you and your family need. I'm your last chance."

"Get out of my cabin."

Rafe gave the Prince a mock bow. "As you wish," he said, retreating from the cabin.

He knew he was walking on shaky ground. The Prince had made the situation here difficult, but the Prince would make sure Rafe paid for his mistakes. Even if Rafe could pull off this trade it could mean the end of the contract that was supposed to keep the ship on the trading lanes, It could also mean their lives if Prince Rissling felt his honor or his family had been insulted. Rafe knew he needed a plan and wanted to talk things over with his First Mate.

There was a serious expression on Mr. Johnson's face as he thought about what Rafe told him of the meeting with the Prince.

"We're in a bad spot," Rafe concluded.

"Everything is within the bounds of the contract, sir."

"Which would only help in a galactic court. There is no surety we will ever get that far. We may have to deal with the interpretation of the contract which is made by the Monarchy on Newcastle. What was your impression of Moses Harrison?" Rafe said, changing the subject.

"Slow, Sir. Not only physically, but he seemed like he wasn't too intelligent. It's hard to believe he's the kind of man a responsible government would put in charge of the only salvage yard and allow to make deals for the whole planet."

"It would appear like that on the surface, Ben, but did you see his eyes?"

Johnson was surprised the Captain used his first name, It had been a long time since they shared the easy familiarity of friends. "No, Sir," the Mate replied.

"They were quick, Ben. A slow man doesn't shift his eyes so rapidly and try to take in everything around him. Moses Harrison seems to fit the pattern of everything else we've encountered on this world; the reality is not what you may believe from the first impression."

"Can we make a deal, sir?"

"It's possible. The price isn't unreasonable. I don't like the idea of parting with our reserves for the power generator, but it can't be helped if we are going to make any deal at all. And it's vital we get what the Prince wants."

"Couldn't we try another planet and make a deal for the trade goods the Prince has stored in the hold?"

"No," Rafe said flatly. "I made a little trip to the hold before coming up here. It's full of native handicrafts and art objects from Newcastle. They might sell on one of the big trading worlds, but they'd never bring enough to buy what we needed there. We'd have to take currency for his goods and then go to another planet where things were cheaper."

Johnson considered the possibilities for a moment before speaking again. "Do you think we can get what the Prince wants from Harrison for less than he's asking now?"

"Not unless I have some leverage," Rafe said. "I need to know more about what's below the surface impression of this planet."

"How do you find out, sir?"

"The new Third Mate, Robison. He has a background in electronics, doesn't he?"

"Yessir. He was with the planetary police on Carthage."

"Get him up here. Robison and I are going to do some looking around that junkyard. We'll continue his education on what it takes to be a trader."

The night was cold, but Rafe was sweating under his tunic. The trip up the mountain in the dark had been easy enough, so he knew it came from tension. He looked above him and saw a clear view of the stars. He would have liked some cloud cover to hide their movements.

Rafe paused outside the gate to the junkyard with Robison crouched down behind him. He gestured to the Third Mate, indicating that they would enter the yard and go to the left. They moved to the nearest stack of junk and paused a moment to see if their movements had been observed.

When there was no indication they were being watched, Rafe began his investigation of the yard. He lifted the canvas covering on the pile and carefully shined a small light on the material underneath

Whatever it had been, he decided, it was only useless, rusted metal now.

"Why would anyone be saving this?" he wondered. "it's good for nothing but Scrap."

They moved carefully from one stack to another, heading deeper into the junkyard toward the huge shed at the rear of the yard. Along the way, Rafe looked under the coverings of several more stacks. There were more piles of rusted metal, some identifiable and some not, and a few stacks that seemed to be composed entirely of empty crates. None of it made any sense to Rafe. There didn't seem to be anything here that was worth trading for.

Deep in the yard, Rafe made the only significant discovery of the trip. He lifted the cover on a stack and found a well-used ground effect vehicle. He motioned for Robison and let him see what was concealed by the canvas.

"How old?" the Captain whispered.

"Ten years. No more," the Mate said.

Rafe nodded in reply and lowered the cover. He pointed around the stack toward the rear of the yard and the large building there. They continued.

Earlier in the day Rafe had seen the building at a distance and assumed it was used to store the larger or more delicate items that Harrison used for trading. He thought it butted up against the mountain, but now he saw it was actually built into the side of the rock wall.

The two men arrived at the corner of the corrugated metal building. Rafe signaled for Robison to break out his electronic equipment and wait while he scouted the side of the structure. He was gone a few minutes and when he returned he drew Robison after him down the side of the building toward the mountain. Fifteen feet down the side of the structure he stopped beside a window.

"Check for alarms," Rafe said,

Robison studied the glass for a minute and then checked the frame with his hands. He took a small meter from his belt and used the probe of the machine at several points around the window.

"Seems like a pretty primitive system, sir. I can bypass it easily and we can get in through there."

"Anything sonic or heat sensitive, Mr. Robison?"

"This place is too crude for that, Sir."

"Never overlook anything, Robison," Rafe said shortly. "That ground vehicle was more like eight years old and couldn't have been made on this planet. It may have seen heavy use, but it was in excellent repair. It tells me that we can't assume everything will be as easy as we want. Check the window again."

The mate broke out his instrument again and spent several minutes probing the window frame. He grunted in surprise twice and double-checked his readings.

"The window is only wired for a contact system, sir, but the room beyond is only a few feet deep. The system only seems to cover that room. I get indications of a much more sophisticated sonic system in a room beyond this one, but I can't read much about it from here."

Rafe led the way to the front of the building, checking the structure along the way for a weakness that might be exploited. He found several places where it looked like the exterior wall had rusted away, but each was patched from inside the building. A careful inspection revealed the patches, which looked like they had been slapped in place, had actually been welded to the exterior wall and formed an airtight seal.

The main door of the building opened by being rolled to one side, and a smaller door had been cut into the large one to admit people to the structure without having to open the big door. Rafe pointed to this small door and indicated that Robison should check it out.

The mate spent a considerable amount of time probing and testing. When Robison turned, Rafe favored him with a questioning expression.

"I've seen banks that weren't as well wired as this place, Sir. I can bypass the contact trigger on the door and the personal scramblers on our belt should take care of the sonic alarm."

Rafe nodded. He outlined a plan for entering the building and set the mate to work bypassing the

alarms.

The Captain went through the door first and ducked behind a stack of crates to the right of the entrance. The Mate followed and closed the door. He turned to find the Captain, gasped and stumbled when he saw the inside of the building. Robison caught himself and joined Rafe behind the stack of crates.

Outside, the building was maybe a hundred feet wide and thirty feet deep before it butted into the mountain. Once inside the mountain, the roof went up from twenty feet to well over fifty. A concrete floor stretched for a hundred feet into the mountain and the sides of the building went outward until it was nearly two hundred feet wide. In contrast to the disarray of the yard outside, here the stacks of crates were aligned in neat rows and anything could be found at a moment's notice.

Rafe looked around and realized he had been wrong. There were still things about this place that could surprise him. He felt a warm breeze on his face and knew the structure was climate controlled. He grasped the gaping Robison by the tunic sleeve and brought the Mate's attention back to the business at hand. He signaled and the two men continued down the right side of the building away from the large center aisle between the stacks of crates.

They moved from one stack to another, pausing every so often for Rafe to inspect the stacks of crates for a clue as to their contents. Most were coded with letter and number combinations, but a few had a label that plainly stated what was inside: manufacturing equipment, household appliances. All the things he could identify were the remnants of the civilization that had once populated Earth.

Ten minutes of scuttling around crates brought Rafe and the Mate to the rear of the building. The Captain carefully led the Mate to the edge of the last row of crates when he heard a noise at the very back of the room. He peered around the edge.

Twenty feet ahead, across an open space, Rafe saw a huge elevator at the back wall which would go to deeper levels of storage. He was studying the elevator when the Mate tugged on the sleeve of his tunic and pointed farther along the wall to the left. There were two men poised over a console and Rafe realized their conversation was the sound he had heard that caused him to stop.

The larger of the two men was Moses Harrison and he seemed to be issuing orders to the second man. He pointed down at the console to a computer screen that glowed amber. The second man seated himself at the console and went to work at a keyboard. Rafe strained and made out a few of the words Harrison was saying.

". . . the microfilm library from level twenty . . . take about two hours . . . contact Smith about the food. . . ."

Rafe watched for another minute. He heard nothing else, but he had enough information. He drew the Mate back behind the crates and motioned for him to start back toward the front of the building.

The Captain and Mate had only taken a few steps when a voice called out from the rear of the building.

"Leaving already, Captain Santos? Don't you want to see it all as long as you've come this far?"

Rafe froze. He motioned for Robison to split up and make a break for the front door, but before either could move two men came from behind stacks on either side of them. The men were big, silent, and armed with stunners. Holding their weapons rock steady, the two men led Rafe and the Mate to the back of the building where Harrison waited.

"I applaud your enterprise, Captain Santos, but I'm afraid it will prove very costly."

"You seem to have lost your accent, Master Harrison."

"A charade, I'll admit, Captain, but most times an effective one."

"Only one of many it seems," Rafe said, waving to include the building around them.

"You are very sharp, Captain. It's probably why you survive as a trader in these hard times."

Rafe inclined his head at the compliment, but reserved comment until he knew more about what was going to happen to him and the mate.

"I wonder how someone as smart as yourself got hooked up with that bloated pomposity I saw this

morning."

"Hard times bring hard compromises," Rafe said flatly.

Harrison nodded his head knowingly. "And desperate measures. Such as tonight's venture?" the big man said. "Unfortunately, this desperate measure will cost you your life."

"Violence hardly seems like it would be a part of your charade."

"As you said, Captain, hard times call for hard compromises. You've seen rather more than we can let you report somewhere else."

Harrison directed his men to search the two traders and while they were doing it, Rafe was studying Harrison. The big man seemed to stand even taller now than he had earlier. He still reminded Rafe of a bear, but now the power was combined with a purposefulness and control that wasn't visible earlier. Rafe knew this man was not only capable of killing him and the mate, but of doing it swiftly and without compunction.

Rafe's trader instinct was to seek every scrap of information that could help him, so he questioned Harrison. "Why?" he asked, indicating the building, but meaning the whole charade Harrison performed.

"Survival, Captain. The continued existence of myself and every soul on this planet depends on making the best trade possible."

"And the appearance of being primitive gives you a little edge in your deals," Rafe stated.

"Correct. It's a matter of confidence and pride. A man who is overconfident that he has the upper hand can become sloppy, and one who thinks he is better than the man he is dealing with, lets his pride get in the way of clear thinking. I have to come out on top of every deal to survive and I'll use any trick I have to."

"One deal couldn't make or break you."

"Yes it could, Captain. I'm dealing with a very limited supply of things to trade and every year there is less demand for items as old as mine. I hold no illusions about myself, Captain Santos; I'm a carrion eater. I live, all of us on Earth live, off the remains of a dead culture. When all the tradable items are gone, so are we,"

"Food?" Rafe asked.

"Energy," Harrison replied.

Now Rafe understood the inflexible demand for radioactives. A planet, even one that had been ravaged, could renew itself over time, but certain things were finite: oil, gas, and radioactive ores.

"We survive only on what you see here and on twenty-seven underground floors. When it's gone or when no one wants it anymore, we stop surviving."

"It doesn't make sense," Rafe said. "This is the birthplace of man. I would have thought the energy problems would have been solved centuries ago."

"It might have happened if it wasn't for a fluke, Captain. We were rapidly approaching a fatal energy crisis and research was being pushed as fast as it could be, but then Dr. Lee Chaytor stumbled on her secret."

"The Chaytor Drive," Rafe said, finishing the thought.

"Yes," Harrison said bitterly. "An accident in weapons research turns up a usable translight drive. Energy research stopped immediately. Why struggle on a used-up world when there were thousands of fresh ones to move to. And so the exodus."

"And you couldn't continue the research yourselves?"

"Not enough qualified people remained," Harrison said. "We try to keep up on the latest energy research in the galaxy, but even our communications equipment is old and limited."

"You can't travel off planet to find what you need?"

"We haven't the manpower or resources to build and maintain a ship," the big man admitted.

"Then I have a solution for you, Master Harrison."

"Talking won't get you out of this, Captain. If everyone finds out how desperate we are, we'll never

be able to make the deals we need to survive."

"No talk, Harrison, a trade. The lives of myself and my mate for the life of your planet."

"More than a fair trade, if you're serious, Captain Santos. "

"Do you know what a sun tap is?"

Harrison's eyes opened in amazement. "Yes, the theory anyway. A power station in orbit around a sun picks up its energy and converts it to broadcast power. It's transferred to a series of satellites around a planet and then broadcast to ground stations, It's only a theory, Captain."

"It *was* a theory. It is now a system in experimental use."

"Where," Harrison demanded.

"My secret," the Captain said.

"I could torture it out of you."

"Yes," Rafe agreed, "but you still couldn't get there and purchase what you need. My proposal is this: I become the authorized agent for Earth. I trade your goods for currency and purchase the sun tap."

"That's all?" Harrison asked warily.

"And whatever profit I can make above the cost of the system."

"I said you were a sharp man, Captain."

There was a long silence while Moses Harrison considered the deal Rafe had proposed. Finally he spoke. "What guarantees do we have, Captain. What stops you from taking our information and our goods and never coming back."

"This deal helps both you and me to survive, Master Harrison. Times are hard, as you said, and I have to have something to trade to keep me in space as a trader. Sometimes you have to trust somebody to help you. Let's call this a matter of faith between two men of honor."

"In other words," Harrison said, "you have as much to lose as we do?"

Rafe nodded in accession.

"I can only give you a possible agreement, Captain. I'll have to talk this over with the planet council, but I believe they'll agree."

Rafe sighed in relief.

"Your man here," Harrison continued, indicating Robison, "will be our guest for the night. In the morning I'll have your answer and we can conclude our other deal for your pompous friend if you still desire."

"I have a contract," Rafe said. "A trader always fulfills his contracts."

"I've heard that," Harrison said. "It's what makes me want to trust you."

The screen on the console of the *Wanderer's* bridge showed the deep black of space surrounding the blue jewel of a planet. The jewel shrunk as the ship retreated from it. Prince Augustus Rissling was on the bridge berrating his Captain.

"This will be our one and only trade, Captain Santos. You are finished as a vassel of Newcastle and as a trader."

Rafe regarded the bulk of the Prince mildly and replied. "Yes, our business is concluded, but I think I'll be in space for a while yet."

"Not if I can help it," the Prince shouted as he left the bridge.

Rafe turned from the retreating figure to the console for a check of the ship's condition.

"Ready to engage translight drive, Sir," Mr. Johnson reported.

"Thank you, Ben. Engage immediately."

"Shouldn't I wait until the Prince is settled in his cabin, Sir?"

"It isn't necessary, Ben. We're a trading ship, not a passenger liner to cater to the whims of guests."

The First Mate engaged the Chaytor Drive and a loud groan issued from the corridor. Both the mate and the Captain were smiling.