

THE GIFTS OF TILE MAGISTRATE

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Chief Justice," the Captain of the Guard said; but his subsequent behavior scarcely reflected the holiday spirit.

Wolfgang Jannike submitted philosophically to the fingerprinting, retina scan and close body search which were his Christmas presents from his subordinate. Jannike could hardly protest an order he had written himself. Nor would any conceivable protest have made the slightest difference; all the human guards at this stronghold were—again, by his own direction—Gurkhas, the deadliest humans alive.

Scanners had shown him unarmed, and the ID signal broadcast by the chip in his skull had been confirmed as legitimate and valid, else he would not have lived to reach Captain Lai. But even after Jannike had been positively identified as the person described by that ID chip, and therefore as the Chief Justice of the Solar High Court—nominal master of this prison—Captain Lal remained vigilant.

That was understandable. Of the four assassins who had come here to date, two had gotten this far; one of them so recently that Jannike could still see the stains on the wall. That one, he knew, had been a friend of the Captain's.

"How may I help Your Honor?" Lal asked when the ritual was done.

"I will speak with the prisoner alone for a time," Jannike replied firmly. He was committed now; at least three microphones had recorded those words.

There was a long pause, during which Captain Lal's eyes made all the responses his lips dared not—even a Gurkha must sometimes tread cautiously—and at last his lips made the only reply they could. "Yes, sir."

"Have you ever read the works of Clement Samuels, Captain?" the Chief Justice was moved to ask then.

"No, sir," Lal replied, doubtless baffled but showing nothing. He spun smartly in place and headed for the door, motioning to two of his men. They fell in behind Jannike in antiterrorist mode, one facing forward and one facing back, weapons out and ready. Somehow, he noted over his shoulder, they contrived to make it seem merely ceremonial. Then he faced forward and followed the Captain, to the cell which held the Vandal, the worst vandal of all time.

"Cell" it was in a legal and actual sense, but most of the humans alive in the Solar System in 2061 occupied meaner quarters. The Chief Justice himself owned slightly more cubic, and more flexible hedonics therein—but not by much. It was odd. The whole System was angry at the Vandal, murderously angry, but it seemed to be a kind of anger that precluded cruelty. The execution would be retribution, but not vengeance. Revenge was not possible, and the crime was so numbingly enormous and senseless that deterrence could have no meaning. Nonetheless society would do what it could to redress the balance.

The Vandal was in an odd and striking position, both legally and morally, and—Jannike saw as Captain Lal waved him into the cell—physically as well. Virtually all humans in free fall are uncomfortable if they can not align themselves with an arbitrary "up" and "down"; since the earliest days of spaceflight men have built rooms with an assumed local vertical, and the occupants have oriented themselves accordingly. This occupant was crouched upside down and tilted slightly leftward with respect to the Chief Justice, drifting slightly in the eddy of the

airflow.

The prisoner was studying the display wall: the cell had a better computer and much greater data storage capacity than Jannike's own home. (On the other hand, Jannike's computer was plugged into the Net, could send and receive data; the prisoner's could only manipulate it. And Jannike's door unlocked from the inside . . .) Most of the data windows that were open on the wall displayed scrolling text or columns of chang-ing figures, which must have been hard to read upside down. So the Vandal's attention must have been chiefly devoted to the central and largest window, which showed a detailed three-dimen-sional model of the Solar System as seen from above the plane of the ecliptic.

She rotated slowly to face Jannike. Recogniz-ing him, she starfished her body until it pre-cessed around to his local vertical, a polite gesture that touched him. "Clear sky, Chief Justice," she said.

"And delta vee to you, Citizen," he responded automatically.

Behind him, Captain Lal made a frown Jannike could actually hear, over the muffled pounding in his own ears, and left them alone; there was an audible click just after the door had irised shut.

Vonda McLisle (ironic that her name should look and sound so much like the word Vandal) almost smiled at her judge. "May I offer you refreshment?"

"I'd be pleased to share tobacco with you."

Her eyebrows rose. "You're a user, too?"

Automatically he gave his stock reply. "It gives solace. And costs hours of life, but I don't expect to run short."

"And I won't live long enough to pay the bill," she agreed. He winced. She struck two cigarettes and floated one toward him; a bearing hummed as the room turned up its airflow to compen-sate. "Have you come to deliver a hangman's apology?"

"No." He picked his cigarette out of the air and took a deep drag. "It is Christmas Eve on Terra. I've brought you three gifts."

"But we don't even know each other."

"On the contrary, we've slept together for weeks."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You and I have both dozed through most of the trial so far, like most of those who've watched it. You're very good, but one of your eyelids flutters when you're deep under."

Again she nearly smiled. "With you it's the nostrils. You're right: as the old joke goes, it's been the equivalent of a formal introduction. But I'm afraid I have nothing to give you in return."

"I think you are wrong."

She pursed her lips quizzically. "Why would you want to give me presents, if deciding whether I live or die isn't enough to keep you awake?"

"Oh, it does keep me awake, Ms. McLisle -at night. But why *not* sleep through the trial itself? It's merely the formal public recitation of facts we both know already, that *everyone* knows already. You nap because my court has nothing to say to you. I nap because you have something to say to me, and will not."

She let smoke drift from her mouth, hiding her face. "The trial told you everything you need to know. The prosecution's case was exhaustive."

"But the defense stood mute. I am so constructed that I cannot condemn a woman to death without knowing the motive for her crime. Even if I cannot understand it, I must know what it is, what she at least conceives it to be."

"I will not tell you my motive."

"You do not have to."

She nodded, taking his statement only at face value, and he let her. "That's right, and I don't want to. So if that's the gift you wanted, I'm afraid—"

"Not at all. The gift I want is a much smaller thing. But before we get to that, here is the first of my gifts." He took an item from a pocket and sent it to her.

Her eyes widened when she recognized the gift.

"A modem! I can find out what's going on, get the latest figures, find out how bad I—" Her voice trailed off as she turned it over in her hands, tracing its design with sure slender fingers. She looked up at him, and the raw gratitude in her eyes seared his heart. "Have you ever been cut off from the Net? Thank you, *Herr Jannike*."

"You are welcome, Ms. McLisle."

"Vonda."

"Wolf. My second gift, Vonda, may seem disappointing; I ask that you wait until it is completely unwrapped before judging. It is a short speech, entitled, 'How I Spent My Christmas Vacation.'"

She must have been desperately eager to interface her first gift with her computer, but she made herself display polite interest. It faded fast.

"The holiday season was a perfect excuse for a short recess, and I needed one. What you did was perfectly clear and indisputable. You misappropriated the *Tom Swift*, the electrical drive unit your firm owns. Abrogating your contract with Systel S.A., you abandoned their *o'neill* in mid-deceleration, leaving several thousand colonists in an orbit that caused them to overshoot the Asteroid Belt by a wide margin. You used the *Tom Swift's* enormous delta vee to intercept Halley's Comet, beyond the orbit of Mars. And then you stole the comet, and threw it away.

"Clear, indisputable—and inexplicable. The experts say you're sane. Your record is admirable. Yet you endangered thousands of innocents, and committed the greatest act of vandalism ever. The comet that led William to Hastings in 1066 and appears in the Bayeux Tapestry, that inspired Newton to write the *Principia*, the greatest scientific book ever, that inspired the first cooperative international space expedition in human history—kicked out of the ecliptic for good, never again to be seen in the sky of Terra after two millenia of faithful punctuality.

"I *had* to know why. I had to understand you, to imagine why you might do the inexplicable. So I went to your apartment."

The modem floated unheeded a meter from her hand. There was no other indication that she was still listening to him; her gaze had drifted away and her body was starting to do the same.

"A thousand reporters must have swarmed over that place, but none did what I did. I sat in it, for two entire days. I was trying to become you.

"I noticed the books at once; I share your fetish. Actual books, bound hard copy on acid-free paper. Naturally I was not surprised to find the complete works of Clement Samuels. He is surely the greatest writer still using that old-fashioned medium, and has millions of subscribers, myself among them. I *was* surprised to

find the complete works of Mark Twain. Even though Samuels makes no secret of his debt to his palindromic namesake, few of his readers bother to go back to the source any more."

"Of all the arts," she said softly, "humor travels worst through time."

"I sat there for hours," he went on, "think-ing of odd things. The comet, of course. Tom Sawyer. The food riots in New York. Clement Samuels, inexplicably wasting away in his sev-enties, when most citizens expect to see their hundredth birthday. The way the chief prosecutor sprays spittle when he's especially angry. The color of . . . no matter.

"I felt awful, inexpressibly sad. Samuels' work has always consoled me—but I've memorized everything he wrote, and I couldn't think of one I wanted to reread. So I took a Twain at ran-dom from your shelves.

"The first thing I noticed was the letter that acted as a bookmark. I read it without hesita-tion when I saw the return address. I never knew you and Samuels were lovers; I don't know how the media missed it."

"It was very brief," she whispered, "and a long time ago. His marriage was too good to risk, and I had a career in space, where he cannot live."

"So I gathered. When I had digested the letter, I finally noticed the passage it marked—and everything fell into place at once."

She was looking at him again now, eyes tracking him as she drifted. "The last eighty years have brought more technological change than the pre-vious two hundred," she said. "That implies an immense amount of pain, Mr. Chief Justice, as you know better than most. One of the things that got us through it, as a society, as a species, was the humor of Clem Samuels. It was gentle humor, humor with no cruelty in it, humor that didn't make you want to curl up and die with the hilarity of it all. Humor that helped you to go on, to endure, to enjoy. Maybe he didn't save us single handed, but we might not have made it without him. I know I wouldn't have; I wouldn't have kept on wanting to. A few hours of stolen passion fifty years ago had nothing to do with it."

"I know," the Chief Justice murmured.

"But he had to identify so damned strongly with Mark Twain. He rarely talked about it, but it tickled him to death that he'd been born at the beginning of 1986, with Halley's Comet at perihelion, just like Twain."

"Now the Almighty must have said, "Here are these two unaccountable freaks,"" Jannike quoted from memory. "'They came in together, and so they must go out together.'" And Twain died on schedule."

"So of course Samuels insisted that he'd go the same way. It was funny—when he was twenty-six."

"And a little pretentious," Jannike said, "so he never mentioned it in interviews. It's not in his authorized biography."

"And then it was 2061 and he was *dying* and nobody knew why," she burst out. "I *knew* why!"

"So you took the most powerful tug in space and hijacked Halley's Comet, flung it out of human space. And now Clement Samuels is said to be recovering. And every astronomer in the System wants a recording of your death agonies, and the rest of the Federation just wants you gone."

She had been ready to die calmly; now she was white with fear. "You mustn't tell anyone, Wolf! *He mustn't know!*"

"That was my first question to myself: why would you conceal your motive? I concluded that you did not want to damage Samuels's marriage by announcing what must have been his first and only infidelity.

"So then I wondered why you had come back, why you did not simply stay with the comet when you knew your life was finished. I decided it was to return the *Tom Swift*, so that the colonists of Systel 2 could be rescued and towed to their proper orbit."

She was calming down as she persuaded herself that he meant to keep her secret. "That's only part of it. I . . . things went out of control out there. I landed on the nucleus, put down the hoses, filled her tanks, lit the fusion torch—and all hell broke loose. The hydrogen I got from the nucleus was even dirtier than I expected, so the drive burned wrong, and the second ion tail I made interacted weirdly with the comet's own and gave me more thrust than I wanted, in an uncon-trollable direction. I meant to see that the comet never appeared in Terra's sky again, but I didn't mean to kick it out of the System completely. I had to cut loose, come back and get access to better computer power, and see if there wasn't any way to partially undo the damage. And you let me have this computer—but without the Net, without the precise up-to-the-minute observations of the entire System network, I didn't have the numbers to crunch."

"And because the rest of the System doesn't have your special empirical knowledge of what happens when you set a comet on fire, and is too angry to ask for it, any answers they get will be wrong," Jannike said. "That's why I brought you the modem. Please use it now."

She leaped to obey. It took her almost fifteen minutes to interface, access, download, integrate and get a trial answer.

"There's a chance," she announced. "If I've understood and correctly described all the anomalies I witnessed—if there are no new anomalies waiting to be discovered—there's a chance to keep Halley in the system. But the window closes in a matter of days, and I wouldn't sell insurance to whoever goes. Oh, Wolf, see that they examine this data—make them send someone! She's so . . . she's so *beautiful* I nearly changed my mind. It made me crazy when I saw how badly I'd miscalculated. I hate to think of her alone out there in the cold dark. Make them send someone!"

"I will," he promised. "Vonda, I said I had three presents for you. May I give you the third now? It's a letter from a friend."

"Oh. Okay, tell me the code and I'll access it."

He shook his head. "No. The friend wanted you to have hard copy, for some reason." He passed it across, an old-fashioned letter in an actual envelope, and politely rotated himself to let her read it in privacy.

It read:

24 December, 2061

My dear Vonda,

The bearer of this letter is more arrogant than you are, more arrogant even than myself, and that much arrogance takes my breath away. You were arrogant enough to maim the Solar System to suit yourself. I was arrogant enough to liken myself to Mark Twain, to think that the stars were placed in their courses to enhance the ego of Clement Samuels. Between us we cost mankind one of its favorite comets. But Wolf Jannike makes us look silly. He was arrogant enough to risk the destruction of two human beings and their marriage—and unlike us, he got away with it.

Did you really think you could anger or hurt my wife, by acting to extend my life with her? Yes, I am recovering, slowly but unmistakably, as you knew I would. Dor-othy says she remembers you, always liked you, and wishes you to know that you are always welcome in our home.

Perhaps the purpose for your silence was to spare me the humiliation and guilt of knowing what destruction my folly inspired. I don't think I was meant to be spared that humiliation and guilt, Vonda; I think I needed it badly. I've been too successful for too long.

Now that—thanks to you!—I am no longer voodooing myself to death, I intend, in the words of the philosopher Callahan, to live forever or die in the attempt. I don't know if I will survive long enough to assuage my guilt, and I know I'll never live long enough to thank you for what you did, but I promise you I will live long enough to write a book about what you did, a book so funny and so sad that people will stop hating you and start laughing at me.

You took a comet the size of a city, and made it a City of Two Tails. That is a far, far better thing than I for one have ever done, and I'm damned if I'll see you lose your head over it.

Meanwhile, my wife and I thank you with all our hearts. There was never any danger of me forgetting you, Vonda my dear, and now I owe you my life. I'll try not to waste the balance of it.

Very truly yours,
Clement Samuels

Jannike knew when she was done digesting it, because she stopped crying and started trying to thank him. He interrupted her.

"I told you that I brought three gifts, Vonda McLisle," he said formally. "I've also brought you something else, which it would be inappropriate to call a gift. As your magistrate, I bring you your sentence. Are you ready to hear it?"

She shook the tears from her head like a horse tossing off flies, and nodded gravely. "Yes, Chief Justice."

"When Mr. Samuels's book is released and understood, I believe you will be considerably less unpopular than you are now. But that will take time. For now, there is only one sentence other than death which I feel the public might accept without rioting. Therefore I condemn you—"

—so this was what Scrooge felt like on Christ-mas morning!

"—to fuel and refit the *Tom Swift* at once, and repair your vandalism as completely and as soon as possible. Charge the fuel to my personal account; I have

reason to believe the System Federation will one day reimburse me. And may God have affection for *your* soul, Vonda my friend."

And he got the gift he had wanted in return: the first smile he had seen upon her face.