

Roadsong

Terry Dowling

Such is the power of names that when Lady Ty and Lady Ti met on deck in the first hour out of Port Allure, it was with all the force of destiny, of precise and personal significance for both women.

Though they had never met before, they had long known of each other, and so in a vital sense were already intimates. As they moved across the commons, so composed and elegant, both in sand-capes and travelling fatigues, both smiling and with hands outstretched in formal greeting, those watching - attendants, crewmen, the two Nationals who were (but could never truly be) their fellow travellers - sensed something of the personal drama, the inescapable kinship, the subtle excruciation felt by both. The third Lady did not smile, could not, would never smile again, but she 'smiled' anyway, an inclination, nothing more, a flow of electrons, an impulse to smile. No-one knew she had done so except perhaps the man who had carried her to the forward rail of the quarterdeck and fixed her there like a figurehead on some ancient ocean-going vessel.

She was not a personality printing, not a biotectic construct at all; she was that rare thing, a creop, an actual brain housed in a three-foot column of brass, a gleaming, antique restante container with seven mutually interfacing backups and the finest Israel Board that money had once been able to buy, a row of glittering sensory beads set across its face in front of where the brain was held. A life support assist from another age.

This third Lady - more than two centuries old then - was the Lady Say.

And like the other two meeting then for the first time, she had been drawn to the deck by the bright sunshine and the wide empty vistas through which this famous vessel ran. Brought there by her captain, Tom Rynosseros, who had arranged for the padded brackets to be fixed to the rail so she could watch the run along the Adanayas-Nos to Inlansay, more than she dared expect, despite her rank and pedigree.

She was there, secure in her improvised cradle, when Ty and Ti came forth and confronted one another. Her sensors gave her the momentous conversation better than organic ears would have.

"It had to happen," said the strikingly beautiful Lady Ty, the taller, darker of the two, dowager of a great Emmened Clever Man. She wore mourning colours still, whites and off-whites delicately arranged to set off dusky skin and a lovely face naked of all adornment at this time of bereavement but a single exquisite Tarasin antique, a flower of gold, silver and titanium set at the forehead, a sign of her vanity, her personal power and quite possibly that she had never loved her husband quite enough.

"Entertainment for the rest," replied her Chitalice counterpart, the Lady Ti, also lovely to look upon but more sharply featured, shorter in stature, wearing sky blues the tones of several latitudes on this great continent, her face strikingly adorned with birkin fans, eyes bandidoed in jewelled and beaded lines as if some precious butterfly had been coaxed to settle upon her eyes and impressed there so it lived and flickered in a net of photocells.

"Yes," the almost naked-faced Ty said. "I'm glad it's finally happened. Now we become friends and frustrate them all."

"Good," Ti answered. "And look! The Lady Say is aboard."

"The one in the bottle, yes. The fortune-teller on the quay was right. It is a time for strange encounters. She can hear us, you think?"

"I'd say not. It's very old. That's an Israel Board sensorium, I'm sure of it. Shall we spend the morning together? Play this down?"

"Agreed. The last thing we want is talk. Let's join the Blue Captain. I suppose we should feel honoured." No doubt in their private reflections, Tom Rynosseros was deemed sufficiently handsome and certainly celebrated enough as a National to warrant the interest of both women. He was of good height, well-enough made, economical in his movements. He wore his brown hair in the longer style of many National captains (and many of the more flamboyant pirates, the truth be known), brushed back across the top of his head in a glossy mane. His blue eyes glittered in his well-tanned face, twinkled there with just enough lines at the corners to show mirth and exactly that hint of wild adventure and hard living Ti and Ty had heard characterized these presumptuous coastal sailors; moreover, he had a warmth both Ladies took as admiring approval, that only the Restante Lady Say probably saw as simple courtesy and indulgent good humour.

Tom watched them approach the quarterdeck and yet again resolved to be careful. These women - the three of them really - were intelligent, reputedly formidable, and at least two - the corporeal two - accustomed to considerable personal power. Ty and Ti were friends at the moment, thank goodness, conducting themselves well, but this was the first hour of the first day of a two-day journey. There were simply too many opportunities for imagined slights, for rumours and jealousies to arise, too many appraising eyes, too many expectations and judgements.

And there was the Lady Say.

Tom knew he should not have brought her up on deck yet. Her impassive gaze and disconcerting silence added a tension to this first meeting he would have avoided at all costs. He had not reckoned on Ty and Ti appearing so soon.

Watching them, he realized that he had unwittingly assumed they would leave the morning, let the voyage routine establish itself, then make tactful afternoon appearances later, all so casual and matter of fact. Not so. Here they were, climbing to the poop, one in mourning, the other strikingly adorned for this time of day, about to involve him in the beginnings of an inevitable and rigorous diplomacy.

And there were two other passengers to add to the equation, the young scholar, Tamas Hamm, and that genial National ecologist, Hugh Archimbault. When Tom saw the men approaching close behind the Ladies, he silently prayed they were not *ajaltas*, those Nationals who endured so much, did almost anything to be near Ab'O notables.

True, they had made their bookings after the Ladies had, but both seemed composed, serious men, without that intense, wild-eyed, monomaniacal gaze *ajaltas* always seemed to have. When they joined the party on the quarterdeck, Tom performed careful introductions, determined to make the most of the situation now it was upon them.

"Mr Hamm, Mr Archimbault, it is the honour of Blue and this ship to introduce the three great Ladies who make this voyage possible. I do this in the old way, by age of rank. The Restante Lady Say, as you see, is a creop. It may be her pleasure to speak with you, but please allow me to learn her wishes regarding society. She is on deck at my suggestion, not her own. I fear I may have compromised her.

"The Lady Ty is the widow of Gennon Bay Jargus, Clever Man of the Emmened, who recently went into the gas at Crater Lake, glory be his. The Lady Ti is wife and hetaera of Chios Lans Sancellin of the Chitalice. I honour them all.

"Noble Ladies, may I present by rank of Nation, the notable Hugh Archimbault of Port Sire, National ecologist presently lecturing in the exchange program at Inlansay, and from Port Marilyn the notable Tamas Hamm, presently enrolled in postgrad studies in the Inlansay matins."

"Gentlemen," the dowager Ty said, inclining her head, smiling beautifully, pleased with the Blue Captain's strict adherence to protocol. Lady Ti's echoing of the word was noticeably cooler. It was absurd, Tom decided, but perhaps Ti saw her Emmened namesake as once again a single woman, in mourning, yes, Ab'O, yes, but one so beautiful. And just possibly the Tarasin piece on her forehead did betray her. Tom regarded the men, for the moment allowed to stay by the graciousness of the Lady Ty if not her less

approving companion, not ordered away peremptorily as so often happened.

Were they *ajaltas* - or just unsuspecting passengers awed by this incredible development, their inconceivable good fortune? Tom studied the scholar's face, the serious grey eyes, the light brown hair over the high forehead; then Archimbault's, round, florid, the cheeks creased by his best smile, eyes comically wide, disbelieving.

Nationals had done such things before. The great romances were full of improbable courtships and pursuits, all manner of futilities and reprisals. It was impossible to know, dangerous to speculate. *Ajaltas* were possibly created by events such as this.

They attempted pleasantries, both men, tried to make polite conversation, but the tension was too great. Perhaps it was the incipient rivalry; perhaps it was the silent canister of the Lady Say standing in its brackets at the rail, her attention on the desert or on them all, who could tell? The Restante Lady had not chosen to speak, was apart from the distinguished company while an obvious focus to it, since Tom's courtesy required them to gather there. The lights twinkling on the Israel Board seemed totally unhuman, merrily oblivious, yet represented viewpoint, sanction, the possibility of judgement.

Tom tried his best to relax, wishing he had waited, had foreseen the present incredible development, all of them lined up before this ancient personality, with an audience of some dozen attendants and crew-members milling about on the commons, unable to keep their eyes averted. He would have laughed at the marvellous comedy of it but dared not; he gazed now at the helm readings, now at the unfolding Road and the horizon, determined not to shake his head when it was what he wished most of all to do. The nervous young scholar saved it for them all. With guileless eagerness to impress, or perhaps an artless yet astute understanding that this awkwardness might spoil this momentous voyage, he cleared his throat.

"There is an orrery at Orroroo where I was born," he told them, then realized he might need to explain himself. "Not one of those tribal life experiments out at Trale, I mean in the ancient sense: an engine for showing the motion of the planets."

"Yes, Tamas," Ty said, naming him, generously indulging this nervous, possibly besotted young man. She had dealt with fawning young men before, was no doubt an expert in spotting *ajaltas*. Tom felt easier hearing her answer him. It boded well.

"Only once in ninety-two years has it stopped working - and that was twenty-five years ago, on the night I was born, at the exact hour, between 2120 and 2200."

"Really?" Ti said, tactfully playing a part too, giving guarded sanction at last, though with a sardonic edge.

Tom gazed out at the land, hoping it would go easily now.

There was a purpose to the scholar's remark.

"Before we began on our voyage," Tamas continued, "I went to that fortune-teller on the quayside. You may have seen him."

"Yes," the older man, said in a way that suggested he might have had a reading done as well.

"Well, this fellow told me that my birth involved a stopping of the planets, just like in the Bible where the sun stopped for the army of Joshua. It was amazing. How could he know? He said this would be a momentous journey we are taking . . ."

"Enough!" Ti said, turning her brilliant eyes towards the desert.

"But, Lady!" Tamas persisted. "He - he said three great Ladies would be involved, not two - and this was all before I knew the Lady Say was to be with us."

Ajalta, Tom decided, but made sure he did not frown. Hamm was here for the adventure of it, to be with Ab'O Ladies who had not demanded closed ship.

"And he said we should all beware The Laughing Man, but wouldn't say why. Is that a Tarot card?"

"No, not Tarot," Archimbault said. "Perhaps north-western Amerind myth . . ."

But he was interrupted by Tom speaking into com. "Shannon, general 360o scan. Five minutes."

Lady Ty reacted at once. "Captain, is there a problem?"

"Probably nothing, Lady. But Tamas just now named the ship of Captain Ha-Ha."

Lady Ti clearly knew the name. "The pirate?"

"The pirate," Tom said. "The ship's real name is *Almagest*, but in a recent interview he referred to it as *Laughing Man*. Tamas, what did this fortune-teller look like?"

The scholar frowned, ran a hand through his short brown hair.

"He was made up for it, Captain . . ."

"Forehead?"

"A star. A five-pointed star. It looked real. A cicatrix . . ."

"It is. That was probably Starman Guy."

"One of Ha-Ha's alter-egos," Archimbault said, recognizing the name.

"One among many, yes."

"They wouldn't declare their intentions," Tamas said, searching the horizons.

The old ecologist answered him. "Why not? I hear Ha-Ha enjoys elaborate . . . entertainments."

"So the name suggests," Ty said.

Her words brought the scholar back to it. "And not to be taken lightly, Lady. Not as innocent as it sounds. In Britain a 'ha-ha' was the name given to a sunken fence surrounding a park or garden, named that because the unwary would stumble from one level to another without warning."

"Pah!" Ti said, discounting Hamm's words, not bothering to conceal her dislike for the enthusiastic young man.

But Archimbault confirmed it. "Tamas is right, Lady. It is from English water-garden traditions."

Ti raised the hood of her sand-cape. "We were wrong to take passage like this. We should have taken tribal escort."

The taller woman laughed. "We wanted time away from our retinues, Ti."

"I wanted to annoy the Kutungurlu, not become a target for highwaymen."

Ty smiled at her new-found friend, then faced Tom. "Captain, can we summon support ships?"

"We can, yes. There were the two Emmened charvis at Port Allure, *Garis* and *Eson*. And the Lady Ti's original escort, *Berengar*. But it might be simpler to put back."

"No," Ty said firmly. "Call them to us."

Tom studied the wide brown eyes below the Tarasin flower. The Emmened dowager was enjoying this unexpected adventure. *Ajaltas* and fortune-tellers, now pirates.

"Lady . . ."

"Do it!" blue-clad Ti said. "Call *Berengar*!"

"This was your choice, Ladies," the words came, though no mouth had moved to form them.

All eyes went to the creep in its improvised cradle. The Israel Board flickered with the life of its occupant.

Ti's eyes narrowed within their glittering cage of birkin fans. "Are you saying we should therefore risk attack, possibly abduction?"

"Not at all, Ti," the voice came, reasonable, unhurried, a voice used to slow time, infrequent conversation. "Notify the ships, by all means. Let their captains advise you. Alert the comsats as well. I simply suggest that Captain Tyson be allowed to conduct his scan and give us counsel. Captain?"

Another time, Tom would have laughed - laughed at how smoothly the ancient Lady dealt with the confused emotions of her corporeal counterparts, at how total the feared entrapment had now become.

"Thank you all for your concern," he said. "We'll complete our scan, notify the satellites, have them confirm our readings. They can track us. And with your agreement, Ladies, we will call Port Allure and see if your House ships have been deployed. If possible, we will summon *Berengar* after us."

"Good," Ty said, and the Chitalice Lady Ti nodded in approval, blazing blue at the eyes, the fans giving her a fierce, elemental quality.

And as Tom began his running contact with Shannon down at com, the party of men and women moved down onto the commons again, the Ladies not ordering the Nationals away. When the Blue Captain heaved a sigh a few moments later, bent over com, he had quite possibly forgotten the untiring, flickering

gaze of the Lady Say.

Scan showed clear. Comsat readings from the Chargan and San-Mar units geo-tethered in the locality of that stretch of the Adanaya-Nos confirmed it. No power readings. Raiders using insulated hulls could only be kite-driven.

The Emmened charvis had departed as feared, but *Berengar* was on its way, a broken static-ridden transmission confirmed.

Tom didn't make it general information, confided it only to Shannon and Scarbo, and they in turn to the rest of the crew, but that torn signal worried him. The Chitalice response code was correct but felt wrong, as if a stronger signal had been dampened or spoiled, attenuated by careful tech. In ship-talk and battle gestures Tom signed for Full Crew and Stations. Overtly it was different.

"Give us the gods, Ben!" Tom cried as he let Rim take the helm, then used a deck-scan to survey the surrounding desert. Old Scarbo went laughing and wise-cracking to the kite-lockers and assembled a wonderful canopy, sent it piece by piece out into the bright morning sky: Chinese Hawks and Demis, Hakkakus, Sode Stars and Levitors, with a higher mantle of racing footmen and - buried in their shapes - four death-lamps spinning like angry diamonds. When those were up and gorging on sunlight, Tom accepted the inevitable return of his guests as cheerfully as he could manage.

"We have teeth," Ty said, noting the lamps, remarking on it to her companions as the Ladies and the Nationals reached the quarterdeck again.

"We have clear at all points," Tom told them. "The satellites are on alert. We're getting fifteen minute updates on that from Chargan and San-Mar. *Berengar* is on its way and should reach us by early afternoon."

"Not sooner?" Ti said, frowning. Her ship, *Berengar*, a defining integer in this fragile power-play, personal advantage, part of a story she would later tell. I saved *Rynosseros*.

"No, Lady. Unless we slow. Speed is our best strategy now."

"I would prefer to wait for *Berengar*," Ti said.

"Yes," Ty agreed, and darted a glance at the creop. "Well, Lady?"

"Thank you, Ty," the creop replied. "I know how difficult it is for you and I am grateful."

"Not at all," Ty said. "Please, what do you suggest?"

"Please," Ti echoed, as if only now remembering this restante creature's status and the strategic value of civility.

"Ladies, you have far more experience with ships than I. This is my first journey in nearly forty years. I long ago decided to leave the running of ships to captains." Which was too self-effacingly said to seem an insult, though the Restante Lady took no chances. "If Captain Tyson would tell us our situation . . ."

Tom inclined his head in the direction of the brass container.

"It may not be *Berengar*. The code was as you gave it, Lady Ti, but the response signal was dampened, possibly by a stronger one much closer."

"Ha-Ha!" Tamas Hamm cried, an absurd comic pronouncement, earning a quick reproachful look from Ti, a cool indifferent one from the dowager who turned to face the Blue Captain.

"Does he have such tech?" she asked.

"He easily could have," Tom said. "If that was Starman Guy on the quay, it all seems likely."

"But the 'sats!" Ti cried. "Chargan and . . ."

"Can be misled. It's how these highwaymen survive."

"Outlaw tech!"

"Of course. Most pirates are supplied by outside organizations."

"Tosi-Go?"

"Yes, Lady Ti. Tosi-Go, Chandrasar, Mikel, entertainment co-operatives too."

"What! Still?"

Tom regretted his words; he was usually more careful about drawing attention to some of the ways the National economy survived. Now he was forced to answer.

"I'd say so. It makes sense."

The creop's voice entered the silence that followed, and for an instant all looked for the speaker once again.

"We run for Inlansay. We've called ahead. Ships will be re-directed. The Chargan is even moving down-tether to increase yield. You are honoured."

"My husband's kinsman, Chargan," Ti told her white-clad companion.

But the dowager was unconvinced, her brows drawing down so the Tarasin inset glinted. "Simpler to slow for *Berengar*. Narrow the gap. I feel I must insist." Ty gazed directly at the creop but there was no contradiction.

"Very well, Lady," Tom said. "I will not stop but we'll drop to 80 k's. *Berengar* will reach us within the hour."

It was a waiting then, an unstated tension of compromise, the passengers and crew watching the distances, watching the play of kites, each other, listening to the thrum of transit, the keening cables, the roar of wheels on graded sand.

When twenty minutes of the hour remained, Shannon appeared on deck, hurried to his Captain and whispered a message that drew all eyes since it was delivered in person.

"Go!" Tom said, and his hands moved swiftly on the controls. *Rynosseros* surged forward as the cells cut in; the lines bowed and the kites momentarily trailed. Shannon returned to com.

"What, Captain?" Tamas Hamm cried, a look of fear on his narrow face.

"What is it?" Ti demanded, and Ty echoed her. Only the ecologist did not speak, though he looked deeply worried.

Tom let Rim take the helm and turned to them all.

"*Berengar* has disappeared."

Ty stared in disbelief. "What! How?"

"Dropped from scan. The signal has vanished."

"Ha-Ha!" the scholar told Archimbault, the ridiculous bathos there again in the name. "A ruse to slow us."

Both Ladies went to speak but Tom held up his hand, concentrating on helm function.

"Chargan and San-Mar know," he said, as if that answered all questions now.

Kites shifted. Down came the Sodes and Demis, up ran parafoils and drab battle-kites, another pair of death-lamps.

Rynosseros moved at 110 k's, the road song a steady thunder in the otherwise hot silent land. Great cloudforms marched across the sky, vast towers tilted towards the west, like monstrous kites themselves at the end of the ship's handful of diverging tethers.

Fifteen minutes later, Tom surrendered the controls to Rim, stood back from the helm. They had speed, defences mounted; he had done all he reasonably could. Once again he smiled, and the four passengers - five - felt they could speak again. As if inviting conversation, young Hammon brought up a tray of kitsas and a big pot of blended tishn, held it while Tom poured for them and passed out steaming cups.

"What now?" Archimbault said, since the Ladies withheld, and Tamas Hamm was munching one of the spicy cakes and studying the deck-lens fitted to the stern rail, angling it along its arc.

"We run as fast as we can for the Inland Sea," Tom said.

"Could it be a scan problem?"

"It could. But *Rynosseros* was planned as a warship, Hugh, every system duplicated, sealed integrity. I agree with Tamas. Ha-Ha has a strategy, has impressive tech committed to this. We'll do what we can."

"What can we do?" Ty said.

"Tamas said he went to the fortune-teller on the quay. Did the rest of you?"

"I did," the ecologist answered.

"Ladies?"

Ty smiled. "It seemed like fun. And, Ti, we had not met then but I saw you . . ."

"It was tiresome waiting on the ship," Ti said. "It was just across from the mooring."

Tom poured more tea. "What were you told?"

Ty shrugged. "Something about strange encounters. An unexpected kiss. That there would be . . . lover's kiss on this journey."

Ti glanced sharply at her friend, at the antique Tarasin piece, at the watching *ajaltas*.

"Lady Ti?" Tom asked.

The Chitalice Lady lifted her head.

"That I would be displayed in glory. Something like that."

"And you, Hugh?"

"Equally mysterious, Captain Tyson." Archimbault's face wore a look of genuine puzzlement. "He told me I would stand at the heart of a dead star and watch a myth re-born."

As a man who lived at the edge of myths, Tom was clearly intrigued by that remark, but the ecologist could tell him no more.

"If Starman Guy is speaking for Ha-Ha," Tom said, "these predictions may become more real than we would wish."

"Or it may be simple destiny," the Lady Say added in her cool emotionless tones.

Ty and Ti turned unreadable glances on the creop then moved to the starboard rail. Hugh Archimbault and Tamas Hamm followed without a word.

Gibber desert under a gibbous moon.

At 2300, *Rynosseros* pulled to a stop at the side of the Road, responding to comsat requests for a series of stationary scans. Tom stood at the rail, watching the black emptiness, listening to the ship-sounds and, beyond them, the near-total silence. Now and then he glanced down at the play of lights on the creop's sensor plate.

"You did well today," the voice came.

"Pardon me?"

"It's been difficult. You handled the Ladies well."

"All the Ladies?"

"Yes. All the Ladies. You're doing what you can."

"Lady Say . . ."

"Serenya, Tom. My friend name."

"It's an honour . . ."

"For me too. You gave me this. Carried me. I find, oh how can I say it . . .?"

"Serenya, I wonder at the whole plan. This is a major commitment; Ha-Ha has some intricate strategy in mind."

"Yes?"

"I wonder if this might be a diversion for some other scheme. Then I wonder if he could in fact arrange it for Ty and Ti to meet at Port Allure, if he could engineer that and so this journey now. Even directed your own movements somehow, supplied you with a set of motives. Was Starman Guy ever engaged at your court? Brought in for entertainment?"

"No, Tom. I saw the fortune-teller on the quay, but never before that. You've had dealings with highwaymen, I know."

"Timms, Buchanan, several others. Never Ha-Ha. Serenya, does your container have imaging function?"

"Yes."

"You don't use it?"

"I prefer to be what I am, not what I was."

"You are what you were."

"And you are far too golden, my Captain. It really should be kept for the others. Being restante makes you cynical and wise in equal parts. Patient, grateful and cynical. Achingly vulnerable too. Painfully philosophical. Am I human?"

"Am I?"

The Israel Board flashed its palette of jewels. "When I was a girl - oh, when was I? was I ever? - I once wore a tall animal mask. I looked out through gauze in the mouth, but other children would keep looking up at the false eyes. It's like that using a projection, Tom. At first it's a relief - everyone's attention is on the holoform. Then you hate it. It's as if you don't exist. They do not see you as you. I prefer their bottle jokes. I'm envied enough for a long life, though it was my husband's choice, not mine."

Which hinted at a former beauty, at something somehow mocked by this cool metal container now making lonely semaphores in the night.

There was a silence.

"It is not a heavylight sensorium," she said at last. "Nothing so sophisticated. Just a projection, no localized POV. What is crudely known as a Corpse Mask, for the day when . . ."

"Lip synch?"

"Yes. Or there was. It has to be forty years. A night like this."

"Why are you here, Serenya?"

She must have cherished the question (perhaps she had feared: "Show me!"). It made it possible. There was a flicker across the Israel Board, a fleeting replication of colours.

The Lady Say - the other Lady Say - stood next to him, made in light, a slim glowing serene figure, taller than Ti, shorter than the Emmened dowager Ty, with a high forehead, hair cowled back in the antique Acan fashion, wearing a plain sashani robe, not some idealized twenty-year-old, Tom noted; this printing had been drawn from later years, though impossibly young next to what she had become.

The lips moved, though the voice came softly out of the darkness at his side.

"Satisfied?"

Tom tried. His eyes went quickly from the wonderful image to the sensor plate, probably much too late but she no doubt saw him try and smiled again in intention.

"Oh yes, Serenya. Oh yes."

But this rare vanity, this small strange gift between them, was not snatched back in time. Tamas Hamm's voice cried out: "Oh, Lady!", breaking on the final word. He was climbing to the poop with the Lady Ty. "How remarkable!"

The Lady Say did not negate the image then. It would have been too desperate, too significant. She endured the faces watching beyond the lightform, the attendants roused by the scholar's cry, what crew were awake for this unscheduled stop, the eyelines turned upon the image and not the restant container. Tom tightened his jaw in a way that showed both dismay and anger at such *ajalta* thoughtlessness.

"Thank you for the honour, Lady," he said, making possible the withdrawal. The lightwoman vanished, leaving the canister dully glinting, its handful of lights flickering in sad contrast to what had been.

"Forgive our intrusion," Ty said, caringly it seemed. "We heard a cry, saw the glow."

Tamas Hamm was delighted. It was more than he dreamed possible.

Now Ti appeared as well, flashing a look of annoyance at Tamas and her erstwhile friend when she found them standing together. Hugh Archimbault came up a few moments later, wearing his cabin robe and dishevelled from sleep.

"Why have we stopped?" he asked drowsily.

"We were asked to do a stationary scan," Tom told him.

Archimbault looked up at the stars as if trying to locate the points of their guardians.

Rim's voice broke from com. "*Berengar* is back!"

"Move out!" Tom cried, reaching for the controls.

"Wait!" Rim said. "Chargan and San-Mar say to wait. They're doing verifications."

"No! They're part of it!" Tom said, and the ship came alive under his hands; the platform stirring as power flowed to the Pabar engines, the wheels moving *Rynosseros* out onto the Road.

"What do you mean - part of it?" Ty cried.

"We've been tricked! Whoever's ghosting *Berengar* has been simulating sky-talk too. We can't trust com."

Rynosseros gathered speed. The atropaic searchlights struck graded surface, showing the way. Tom studied those sweeps, guided his ship according to them, trying not to show his concern. This night-run boded ill. Already misled by pirates, now he dreaded land anchors, road-chains, further parts of this clever trap. Phantom *Berengar* was probably *Almagest*, *Laughing Man* moving in, one ship or more. The highwayman, Ha-Ha.

Tom said nothing of such dangers. He kept to 80 k's, as much as he dared, leaving time to slow, but giving assurances to the others. They were in transit, he said, as safe as they could be under the circumstances; he urged them to go below, to get as much rest as possible.

The passengers did as he said, wanting to stay but given the example by Ty, whose earlier insistence to slow for *Berengar* may have doomed them all. Ti kept back her comments as well - her talk of Chargan embarrassed her now.

Tom had off-duty personnel roused. Shannon, Strengi and young Hammon came to the deck, were briefed, deployed quickly about their duties, Hammon relieving Rim at com so Rim could help Scarbo get a Farview inflatable aloft. *Rynosseros* could not trust her tech-assisted eyes any longer; older, more traditional opticals were needed.

The Farview shot up on helium lifts, almost immediately gave yawing, infra-red visuals of 20 k's behind, revealed the enemy.

"Three bogeys at twelve," Scarbo read from his dish.

"Speed? Configuration?" Tom asked needlessly, his concern showing at last. Scarbo was already trying for that information.

Perhaps they had momentarily forgotten the Restante Lady, taking whatever she could, gleaning minutes and half-lit glimpses of helm and crew activity, expecting to be remembered and taken below at any moment.

Scarbo's readings kept her from that, gave her ships and the night and the lives of these wonderful striving men.

All day Scarbo had been a bald, wiry, sun-toughened figure, never at rest, almost a living extension of the cable-boss, some magical part of the canopy itself thrown up djinn-like by the ship; now he was a voice, a shadowy shape washed with the soft glow of the helm display.

"Two 90-footers. One closer to 110. Speed down to 90. They may be worried we'll dump land-anchors and hedgehogs. Or . . ." He hesitated, and the Lady Say decided this would be it, though it wasn't yet.

"What, Ben?" Tom said.

"They know the comsat ruse failed, right? Yet they're holding back."

"They mean to run us till morning. We cross Lateral 24. I'd say blockade ahead or more raiders then."

"Aye, Tom. Risking tribal ships either way."

"So they're reading the route."

The old kitemaster made a gruff, disbelieving sound.

"Satellite tech?"

"Don't even think it. I'd say watch-points. Ships off-Road. A firefight."

"Second that. This tech, Tom. Outside sponsors. Tribal factions . . ."

"Benefiting in some way, yes. It wouldn't be the first time. Or trading back hostages."

"Looking for others," Scarbo said.

And Tom remembered her. "Lady . . ."

"I'd like to stay, Tom."

"Serenya . . ."

"Let me stay."

". . . what other tech do you have?"

The creop gave a flat bleat, the closest thing the old voice system could manage to a laugh. "I expected it. Ask."

"Contingency."

"I know. Ask it, Tom."

"Did you simulate sat-scan?"

"No. I can dredge up a phantom that was never me, that's all. I'm not Captain Ha-Ha."

"I wasn't saying . . ."

"I know, Tom. I would never play with people's lives. I agree with Ben. Someone has supplied Ha-Ha with incredible tech for this. They want . . . one of us, all of us, who can say?"

"You should be below."

"Tom, I think you know how incredibly alive I feel tonight. I think you can imagine what it's like being here on deck, with risk and pursuit and people around me who do not act out of protocol, advantage and familial duty, who have seen enough strange things to accept what I am. Showing my image before was something I swore never to do again. I felt abandoned doing it, vulnerable and - coquettish. Passionate. Those words, those things. Incredible. Notice, you and Ben did not exchange glances just now. You accept it. You are relating to me. Oh, how I thank you for something so simple."

"That cradle can be permanent. Whenever you want."

"Tom . . ."

"You are welcome on this ship."

The Lady hesitated, and Tom actually left the helm to his old friend, came over and crouched before the flickering palette.

"Serenya, I think it might be good to have your image stand with us, so you can see us together. I think you'd hate it but love it too."

"You don't feel . . ."

"You decide. I'd like it very much."

Lights ran upon the Israel Board, a scattering of jewels in the night. The Restante Lady could not sigh; she ran emotions in light patterns, in ghost impulses to touch and hold and be truly - finally - there.

"Now?"

"Why not now?"

And her ghost sprang up, stood at the rail, never touching it, and for the next two hours, the raider tech behind would have read three figures standing at the helm.

At 0700, the passengers were on deck again, breakfasting on tisen and mirad rolls, nervously watching the terrain around them as *Rynosseros* ran at 100 k's along the Adanaya-Nos.

It was difficult for the crew to conceal their preparations or their own nervous edge, and the Ab'O Ladies soon translated those looks and climbed back to the poop, Hamm and Archimbault silently behind them like all the *ajaltas* ever born.

"Captain," Ty said. "They are close by." She wore an identical mourning costume to the previous day, again with the Tarasin piece set above the eyes.

"Yes, Lady," Tom admitted. "We have three ships ten minutes behind us."

"We were not told!" Ti said. Today she wore a simple robe of deep lustrous blue, her eyes sparingly adorned with a bandido of peapta scales that made the most of her sharp features. She radiated energy, mostly as aggression but with a striking presence all the same.

Tom made no apology. "There was nothing you could do."

"Our safety, Captain, is . . ."

"No more important than anyone else's on this vessel."

"You dare!" Ti snapped.

"Oh, Ti," the dowager said. "Don't quarrel now. This is all we have."

Then Ty must have remembered the creop's words from the previous day, realizing the similarity in what she had just said. She gave her wonderful laugh and went to watch the desert rush by.

Lateral 24 was it - a choice of three directions: turning away from the still-distant Sea on two of them, turning away from the possibility of support ships as well.

Rynosseros ran towards the intersection, com at maximum, calls for help going out but unheard, so it

seemed, the 'sats making nothing of one ship ahead of a leisurely three at 90 k's, with others using unprecedented cloaking tech to create a blind spot, a nullity well, a fateful rendezvous.

When Tom saw the line of the Lateral crossing the Road before them, making its vast cruciform upon the blood-red land, the long sweeps, the red-gold halo, curves made by turning ships, he saw the other part of their danger as well. More raider-ships were moving in, three black cinders under low glittering mantles trailing dust, one on each approach and converging on that vast turning circle, everything wonderfully synchronized.

Rynosseros was the fourth part of that dance, closing the shape. Tom and Ben, everyone on *Rynosseros*, watched those austere plated charvis rushing to meet, saw the death-lamps crackling with imprisoned light, saw the inevitability of death and ruin.

"Surrender to them, Captain," Ty said. "We can survive this."

"No!" Ti said. "I won't be taken!"

"Please, Ti." It was the creop's voice. "Tom, I know you must not lose your ship, but please bring down your fighters. Meet them."

Tom assessed, calculated quickly, sought strategies and answers, saw only too many ships, too wild a terrain to flee the Road altogether, the massed lamps of Ha-Ha's fleet, found, again, inevitability and death.

He touched the controls, showing none of the emotion he felt, signalling for his crew to wind in the mantle, slowing *Rynosseros* to 60, then 40, then 30 k's, the raiders matching the speed loss so that the closing shape became a graceful, almost beautiful thing, an elegant resolve, without fury.

Rynosseros rolled to a stop upon the great silent circle, passengers and crew watching the highwaymen vessels move slowly closer, death-lamps and deck-lenses turned upon them like angry stars. They were not true charvolants, these raiders, but atabanques, with canopies consisting only of photonic parafoils and death-lamps, none of the vast array of traditional kites used on tribal ships and National vessels. The Ladies, Ty and Ti, regarded them with added disgust because of it.

When *Rynosseros* was fifty metres from them, the raiders stopped, and at least thirty pirates disembarked, moved quickly and silently towards their quarry, lean efficient men in dark fighting leathers, carrying antique Nagamitsu katanas and Matsumoto parrot-guns provided by Tosi-Go, many wearing glass distortion masks so they resembled demons whose heads were living jewels.

Tom went to the rail, stood there while these quiet business-like figures climbed aboard and went about the vessel, securing weapons, gathering everyone together.

Within minutes, *Rynosseros* was on its way again, moving in formation down Lateral 24, away from the possibility of tribal ships arriving. Tom and Ben remained on the quarterdeck with the Ab'O Ladies and the silent *ajaltas*; the attendants and the rest of the crew sat quietly on the commons under the watchful eyes of Ha-Ha's men and the worn beaks of their parrot-guns.

"Which of you is Ha-Ha?" Tom asked one of the jewel-heads, a tall solidly-built man in an inconnu mask of blue glass. His features were twisted into roils by the careful imperfections.

"We go to meet him now," the tech-fracted voice said, which confirmed Tom's suspicions. None of the ships had been *Almagest*.

"Not behind?"

"Ahead."

"Is he Starman Guy?"

"Ahead, Captain." He moved his hand to the worn man-bone handle of his parrot-gun.

Tom disregarded the man's gesture. "You've massed a lot of ships."

"Captain, look behind. What ships?" Tom did as he said, saw the Road behind them deserted. The atabanques had dispersed. "Our pursuit ships are on their way to Inlansay, fully-kited and well placed. Our escort, as you see, no longer exists. They are part of the land."

"You . . ."

"Be patient, please, and you will survive this."

Twenty minutes later, *Rynosseros* turned off the Road onto a trail of well-packed gibber, travelled several k's into what looked like a nest of low dry hills, but which Tom soon recognized as the century-old impact crater of the giant meteorite Quaelitz. Waiting in that natural amphitheatre of eroded rock-melt was *Almagest*, Ha-Ha's rust-golden, verdigris-marked 100-footer, kites down, lean and low like a reptile dreaming in the sun.

Rynosseros entered the arena over its low north-eastern rim and rolled to a stop close to the pirate ship. When the kites had been wound in, a dozen figures left *Almagest*, crossed the crater floor and climbed aboard.

The man in the lead stood taller than even the blue jewel-head at Tom's side, well over six foot, in black fighting leathers and a splendid inconnu that made his head a dazzling jewel also, but a shifter, multiform: now a garnet, now an emerald, now a fine sapphire shifting to amethyst.

"Captain Tom, Ladies, Gentlemen, welcome to Quaelitz. We will not detain you long. There is a ceremony to perform, a simple thing, utterly self-indulgent. A contest, then a transaction."

"A contest!" Ti said, the scales about her eyes glinting in the hot light.

"Yes, Lady. If you and the Lady Ty would be so good as to stand by the Restante Lady. It is to be the Judgement of Paris."

"The what?" Ti demanded.

"You may know the myth. From Greek mythology. How Paris was called on by the goddesses Athena, Hera and Aphrodite to choose the most beautiful among them. Each promised certain favours were she chosen - Athena: wisdom, beauty and victory in battle; Hera: power and kingship; Aphrodite: the love of the most beautiful woman. Paris chose Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and so infuriated the other goddesses that they resolved to punish him. Subsequently, he met Helen, and so precipitated the events which led to the Trojan War. What favours do you Ladies promise? Ty?"

"I do not deal with pirates . . ."

"Oh, but you must, Lady. You must give favours and oaths or you might very well forfeit your life, certainly your honour - to use that quaint old term."

"Our fleets will destroy you!" Ti snapped.

"Give me your fleets. I will eat them and you will be both ravished and shipless."

"You dare!"

"Oh, I do. I do. So, Ty. Your promises. What will you give?"

"For freedom?"

"To be chosen as the most lovely."

"I'm only interested in being free of this."

"It's the same thing. Humour me."

"For freedom: my ship, *Garis*, a dozen fine swords . . ."

"Such precise terms. Do better. That Tarasin piece you wear."

"No. I mean it. No."

There was probably a smile behind the emerald-changing-into-ruby mask; his voice carried the trace of one. "Very well. A kiss then."

"No!" Ti cried.

"Not from you, Lady Ti," he said, turning his head slightly, appearing to face her, though who knew where his gaze fell? "Well, Ty?"

"Yes."

"Ty, no!"

"Excellent," Ha-Ha said. "And from you, Ti?"

"Never! I would never kiss you . . ."

"I do not ask it. But I think you will parade naked before us all."

Ti was speechless. Her mouth hung open, her eyes glittered. Finally she found words.

"Your death is written. The Chitalice will find you, burn you."

"But you will go naked all the same, displayed in glory, or I swear worse will happen."

"Are you done?" Ty demanded.

"Done? Why no, Lady. There is still one more. Lady Say?"

"You are not serious," Ty said, and the Lady Say echoed it, those exact words, in her calm, always calm voice.

"Ah, but I am, Serenya. Never more serious. You will display your image for the judging. What will you give to be free?"

"Why, my poor life, Captain, what else? Will you take it? Free me of it?"

"Serenya!" Tom cried.

The jewel-head raised a hand to command silence, but did not answer at once. He stood flashing in the fiery glare that filled Quaelitz, ringed by his men, by his crater hideaway, by the eternal land.

"Yes," was all he said, very quietly, then in a stronger voice: "And who will be Paris, judge of the contest? So the winner can . . ."

"I will!" Hugh Archimbault cried, determined to be first, speaking mere moments before a chorus of others, Tamas Hamm, Scarbo, Rim, Shannon.

"I am responsible for bringing her here," Tom said. "I would like the privilege."

"Of course you would, Captain Tom. And I would dearly like to know who you would choose, though I'm sure I can guess."

Ty and Ti both flashed glances at Tom, silently demanding to know what his choice would be.

The highwayman gave them no time to speak.

"You, Guy?" he said. "Our fortune-teller? But you know already surely. Let's pick our young National here - Tamas Hamm, is it? Mr Hamm, would you honour us by choosing the most beautiful of these Ladies?"

The young man stepped forward, obviously afraid, trying his best to be brave and defiant.

"The others will pay the penalties you have stipulated?" he asked.

"Exactly as stipulated - except for the Lady Say. I would not take her small piece of life."

"Then . . ."

"Wait!" Ha-Ha said. "Take this monitor. So we know you tell the truth. So we know you choose honestly."

The young scholar took the small device, held it up so all could see the green telltale shine on the dull black case.

"Who is the most beautiful?" the pirate demanded, his voice booming out upon Quaelitz, echoing across the bowl of heated air, beyond *Almagest*, filling the crater.

Tamas Hamm regarded the glowering, furious Ti, the stately dowager, the dully gleaming creop that was all there truly was of Lady Say.

"Please display yourself, Lady," he said.

"No," the Restante Lady said, defiance and resolution in a play of lights, in the warm gleaming metal.

"It matters. Please do it."

And the image was there, more ephemeral than ever in the harsh actinic light, the barest suggestion of her form of the previous night.

The highwayman faced Tamas Hamm. "Choose, Paris!"

"I have," the young man answered. "The Lady Say."

"What!" Ti cried, furious at this ultimate indignity, her hands hard fists at her sides.

Ty just laughed.

The ruby-garnet-sapphire inconnu flashed.

"Honest choice, Mr Hamm?"

"Yes."

"And the monitor remains green. Excellent."

"*Ajalta!*" Ti cried. "He is! It's all he is! A crazy man!"

"Your kiss, Lady Ty."

The Emmened dowager drew a deep breath, seemed to visibly brace herself. "Remove your mask."

The garnet-into-amethyst shook his splendid head.

"Give your kiss to Paris for his troubles. And, Lady, a deep kiss, you understand me? No courtly peck. A lover's kiss, yes?"

Ty had prepared herself and did not hesitate. She went over to the scholar, took his head between her hands and put her mouth to his. Once engaged, one hand went to the back of his neck, holding the young man's mouth to hers.

When they separated, Ty turned and walked to where Ti and Hugh Archimbault stood staring in amazement.

"Excellent," Ha-Ha said. "Now . . ."

"No!" Ti cried.

"My Lady, I urge you to fulfil your appointed favour. Voluntarily, or you will do it by force. Guy, assist her please."

Starman Guy made a move forward, but it was not needed.

The Chitalice Lady's face was set in an expressionless mask, rigid at the eyes and mouth, unrelenting. She quickly worked at clasps and contacts. Her robe came free; she stepped away from it.

"Underwear please."

Ti removed the last of her garments, revealed her beautiful body, golden dusk, with the fine coils and scrollings of her *ais* tattoos, and the cicatrices where the sand of her State had been worked into delicate contours: the secret lady-map imitated by so many National women.

"Walk to the helm display, past Mr Hamm and back please."

Ti did so, and gracefully considering her underlying rage, reached her clothes again.

"You may dress."

Ti did so, not just pulling on her robe, but first lifting her arms in an imprecatory gesture like a priestess, gazing at the hot sky, then reversing the order in which she had undressed herself, making a ritual of that as well. It was beautiful how she did it, concealing her secret map, the secret country of herself, commanding and powerful, making it plain to all who watched by what allurements she controlled her Clever Man husband.

"Thank you, Lady. You are truly beautiful."

Ti said not a word, but went to stand near her Emmened friend.

Ha-Ha drew his parrot-gun then, turned it at Tom Rynosseros.

"Now, Captain Tom. 'Know your man' is how I play this, so I hold my gun at you. I tell you that the Lady Say remains with me; she has given me her life and so I take it."

"She won," was all Tom said.

"Still I take it. My rules."

Tom tensed as if to spring.

"I will shoot you, Blue Captain."

"Please, Tom!" Serenya cried, lights running across the Israel Board, flashes of desperate emotion.

"Captain Ha-Ha, let me speak with him alone. Then I will go with you. He will allow it." And when Ha-Ha hesitated. "I won your contest fairly."

"Very well. Guy, move everyone for'ard."

Within a minute, Tom was alone at the rail, crouching before the ancient Lady, hearing what she said, nodded once, gazed out over the commons, nodded again and touched the container in what could only be a caress.

Then he stood away from the creop, and Ha-Ha and his men came forward.

"Take her," Tom told the tall pirate leader. Ha-Ha gestured to Guy, who gently lifted the brass container from its cradle.

"The brackets, Captain? May we have them?"

"They remain here. Her place on *this* ship."

"I understand."

His men began climbing down to the crater floor, walking away from *Rynosseros*. At the rail, Ha-Ha

turned.

"Ladies, Gentlemen, we have recorded what occurred here today. Copies will be sent to you for your pleasure, a souvenir of the Quaelitz contest. The least we can do. Good day."

Almagest departed first, throwing up a clutch of parafoils to catch the thermals, moving forward under stored power and lifting over the low rim, disappearing into the desert beyond, quickly, expertly, practised in stealth.

It took several minutes for *Rynosseros* to do the same, but soon she was moving out of Quaelitz too, returning to Lateral 24 along the gibber trail, heading back towards Inlansay.

Hugh Archimbault and Tamas Hamm stood with Scarbo and Tom near the helm. Ty and Ti talked together a few metres away, close to where the brackets were fixed, but they fell silent when Scarbo spoke.

"What did she tell you, Tom?"

Ty moved closer, so did her Chitalice companion.

"She revealed her true purpose for being out here."

"True purpose, Captain?" Ty said.

"She arranged this rendezvous with Ha-Ha . . ."

"What!" Ti cried. Both *ajaltas* wore looks of astonishment. Scarbo was grinning.

Ty gave a slow appreciative smile as well. "Her way of being free."

"The contest - it was all a pre-ordained farce!" Ti said, and stalked off, heading for'ard. Ty followed laughing, and Hugh Archimbault went after them both, as casual-seeming as he could manage, but as resolute as ever. Scarbo caught Tom's subtle hand-sign and went laughing to the cable-boss to brief the rest of the crew on what had occurred.

Tom was left with only Tamas Hamm for company.

"She told you," he said.

"Yes."

"You haven't betrayed me."

"It has been her dream for forty, fifty, who knows how many years? - to be out in this, with all its risks. She is *ajalta* also. In reverse. After nearly two centuries of tribal ways, she wanted to be in a new world, part of a new way."

"Desperately. Yes." There was a play of emotion in the young man's eyes.

"She made the arrangement all those years ago with . . . your father?"

Tamas nodded. "Yes. We keep it to a few families when we can. Mine or Guy's or Mylo's."

"Mylo was the blue jewel-head?"

"Aye. He's good at it. The right look. We use him for all our . . . promotion material."

"But it's you. Keeping your father's arrangement."

Again, Tamas nodded. "Forty years ago, she first made the arrangement. From the heart of a tribal capital, a tribal 'prison', she managed it somehow - trapped by her status as a venerated relict. She had to wait for a change of Princes, till a new ruler no longer required her to be so well protected."

"You made an arrangement with this new Prince!"

"I did. We did. He is from a different maternal lineage. He did not need a relict to enhance his claim."

"The tech. He supplied it."

"Aye. He was the other part of this. Such careful planning, Tom. We could not risk strife with the Chitalice or the Emmened."

"And yet you risked a contest!"

Tamas grinned. "I couldn't help myself. I am a highwayman, after all. It makes great copy. And it's something extra for the Prince, for all of us." He became thoughtful. "But she almost changed her mind at the end, I think."

"She had not expected our invitation."

"Your offer, no. I think you helped prepare her for what we can now give."

Tom glanced at the brackets. "You will let her return if she wishes it?"

"The moment she wishes it. I swear it."

"The word of a pirate," Tom said, laughing.

"Aye, but Paris and true *ajalta* too. I chose in all honesty, Tom, and she knew it. The light stayed green. That is why she came with me."

And they smiled, standing there together, almost friends, surely, strangely becoming that, as *Rynosseros* ran down the wide red Road towards Inlansay.

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