

Fly-By-Night



The windows in *Odysseus* had been skylights. The doors had become hatches. I ran down the corridor looking at numbers. Seven days we'd been waiting for aliens to appear in the ship's lobby, and nothing!

Nothing until now. I felt good. Excited. I ran full tilt, not from urgency but because I could. I'd expected to reach Home as frozen meat in one of these Ice Class cargo modules.

I reached 36, stooped and punched the steward's bell. Just as the door swung down, I remembered not to grin.

A nightmare answered.

It looked like an octopus underwater, except for the vest. At the roots of five eel's-tail segments, each four feet long, eyes looked up at me. We never see Jotoki often enough to get used to them. The limbs clung to a ladder that would cross the cabin ceiling when the gravity generators were on.

I said, "Legal Entity Paradoxical, I have urgent business with Legal Entity Fly-By-Night."

The Jotok started to say, "Business with my master-" when its master appeared below it on the ladder.

This was the nightmare I'd been expecting: five to six hundred pounds of orange and sienna fur, sienna commas marking the face, needle teeth just showing points, looking up at me out of a pit. Fly-By-Night wore a kind of rope vest, pockets all over it, and buttons or corks on the points of all ten of its finger claws.

"-is easily conducted in virtual fashion," the Jotok concluded.

What I'd been about to say went clean out of my head. I asked, "Why the buttons?"

Lips pulled back over a forest of carnivore teeth, LE Fly-By-Night demanded, "Who are you to question me?"

"Martin Wallace Graynor," I said. Conditioned reflex.

The reading I'd done suggested that a killing snarl would leave a kzin mute, able to express himself only by violence. Indeed, his lips

wanted to retract, and it turned his Interworld speech mushy. "LE Graynor, by what authority do you interrogate me?"

My antic humor ran away with me. I patted my pockets elaborately. "Got it somewhere-"

"Shall we look for it?"

"I-"

"Written on your liver?"

"I have an idea. I could stop asking impertinent questions?"

"A neat solution." Silently the door swung up.

Ring.

The Jotok may well have been posing himself between me and his enraged master, who was still wearing buttons on his claws, and smiling. I said, "Don't kill me. The Captain has dire need of you and wishes that you will come to the main workstation in all haste."

The kzin leapt straight up with a half turn to get past the Jotok and pulled himself into the corridor. I did a pretty good backward jump myself. Fly-By-Night asked, "Do you know why the Captain might make such a request?" "I can guess. Haste is appropriate."

"Had you considered using the intercom, or virtual mail?"

"Captain Preiss may be afraid they can listen to our electronics." "They?"

"Kzinti spacecraft. The Captain hopes you can identify them and help negotiate." He stripped off the corks and dropped them in a pocket. His lips were all right now. "This main workstation, would it be a control room or bridge?" "I'll guide you."

The Kzin was twisted over by some old injury. His balance was just a bit off. His furless pink tail lashed back and forth, for balance or for rage. The tip knocked both walls, toc toc toc. I'd be whipped bloody if I tried to walk beside him. I stayed ahead.

The Jotok trailed us well back from the tail. It wore a five-armhole vest with pockets. It used four limbs as legs. One it held stiff. I pictured a crippled Kzin buying a crippled Jotok... but Paradoxical had been agile enough climbing the ladder. I must have missed something.

The file on Jotoki said to call it they, but that just felt wrong. "Piracy," the Kzin said, "would explain why everything is on its side." "Yah. They burned out our thruster. The Captain had to spin us up with attitude jets."

"I don't know that weapon. Speak of the ship," he said. "One? Kzinti?" "One ship popped up behind us and fired on us as it went past. It's a little smaller than *Odysseus*. Then a Kzin called us. Act of war, he said. Get the Captain to play that for you. He spoke Interworld... not as well as you." Fly-By-Night talked like he'd grown up around humans. Maybe he was from Fafnir. "The ship stopped twenty million miles distant and sent a boat. That's on its way here now. Our telescopes pick up markings in the Heroes' Tongue. We can't read them."

He said, "If we were traveling faster than light, we could not be intercepted. Did your Captain consider that?"

"Better you should ask, why are we out of hyperdrive? LE Fly-By-Night, there is an extensive star-building region between Fafnir and Home. Going through the Tao Gap in Einstein space is easier than going around and gives us a wonderful view, but we're in it now. Stuck. We can't send a hyperwave help call, we can't jump to hyperdrive, because there's too much mass around us."

"*Odysseus* has no weapons," the Kzin said.

"I don't have actual rank aboard *Odysseus*. I don't know what weapons we have." And I wouldn't tell a Kzin.

He said, "I learned that before I boarded. *Odysseus* is a modular cargo ship. Some of the modules are passenger cabins. Outbound Enterprises could mount weapons modules, but they never have. None of their other commuter ships are any better. The other ship, how is it armed?"

"Looks like an archaic Kzinti warship, disarmed. Gun ports slagged and polished flat. We haven't had a close look, but ships like that are all over known space since before I was born. Armed Kzinti wouldn't be allowed to land. Whatever took out our gravity motors isn't showing. It must be on the boat."

"Why is this corridor so long?"

Odysseus was a fat disk with motors and tanks in the center, a corridor around the rim, slots outboard to moor staterooms and cargo modules. That shape makes it easy to spin up if something goes wrong with the motors... which was still common enough a century ago, when *Odysseus* was built.

In the ship's map display I'd seen stateroom modules widely separated, so I'd hacked the passenger manifest. That led me to read

up on Kzinti and Jotoki. The first secret to tourism is, read everything.

I said, "Some LE may have decided not to put a Kzin too close to human passengers. They put you two in a four-passenger suite and mounted it all the way around clockwise. My single and two doubles and the crew quarters and an autodoc are all widdershins." That put the aliens' module right next to the lobby, not far apart at all, but the same fool must have sealed off access from the aliens' suite. Despite the Covenants, some people don't like giving civil rights to Kzinti.

I'd best not say that. "We're the only other live passengers. The modules between are cargo, so these," I stamped on a door, "don't currently open on anything."

"If you are not a ship's officer," the Kzin asked, "what is your place on the bridge?"

I said, "Outbound Enterprises was getting ready to freeze me. Shashter cops pulled me out. They had questions regarding a murder"

"Have you killed?" His ears flicked out like little pink fans. I had his interest.

"I didn't kill Ander Smittarasheed. He took some cops down with him, and he'd killed an ARM agent. ARMs are-

"United Nations police and war arm, Sol system, but their influence spreads throughout human space."

"Well, they couldn't question Smittarasheed, and I'd eaten dinner with him a few days earlier. I told them we met in Pacifica City at a water war game... anyway, I satisfied the law, they let me loose. I was just in time to board, and way too late to get myself frozen and into a cargo module. Outbound Enterprises upgraded me. Very generous.

"So Milcenta and Jenna-my mate and child are frozen in one of these," I stamped on a door, "and I'm up here, flying First Class at Ice Class expense. My cabin's a closet, so we must be expected to spend most of our time in the lobby. In here." I pushed through.

This trip there were two human crew, five human passengers and the aliens. The lobby would have been roomy for thrice that. Whorls of couches and tables covered a floor with considerable space above it for free fall dancing. That feature didn't generally get much use.

An observation dome exposed half the sky. It opened now on a tremendous view of the Nursery Nebula.

Under spin gravity, several booths and the workstations had rolled up a wall. There was a big airlock. The workstations were two desk-and-couch modules in the middle.

Hans and Hilde Van Zild were in one of the booths. Homers coming back from Fafnir, they held hands tightly and didn't talk. Recent events had them extremely twitchy. They were both over two hundred years old. I've known people in whom that didn't show, but in these it did.

Their kids were hovering around the workstations watching the Captain and First Officer at work, asking questions that weren't being answered.

We'd been given vac packs. More were distributed around the lobby and along the corridor. Most ships carry them. You wear it as a bulky fanny pack. If you pull a tab, or if it's armed and pressure drops to zero, it blows up into a refuge. Then you hope you can get into it and zip it shut before your blood boils. Heidi Van Zild looked around. "Oh, good! You brought them!" The little girl snatched up two more vac packs, ran two steps toward us and froze. The listing said Heidi was near forty. Her brother Nicolaus was thirty; the trip was his birthday present. Their parents must have had their development arrested. They looked the same age, ten years old or younger, bright smiles and sparkling eyes, hair cut identically in a golden cockatoo crest. It's an attitude, a lifestyle. You put off children until that second century is running out. Now they're precious. They'll live forever. Let them take their time growing up. Keep them awhile longer. Keep them pure. Give them a real education. Any mistake you make as a parent, there will be time to correct that too. When you reverse the procedure and allow them to reach puberty they'll be better at it.

I know people who do that to kittens.

Some of a child's rash courage is ignorance. By thirty it's gone. The little girl's smile was a rictus. Aliens were here for her entertainment; she would not willingly miss any part of the adventure, but she just couldn't make herself approach the Kzin or his octopus servant. The boy hadn't even tried. First Officer Quickpony finished what she'd been doing. She stood in haste, took the vacuum packs from Heidi and handed them to the aliens. "Fly-By-Night, thank you for coming. Thank you, Mart. You'd be Paradoxical?"

The woman's body language invited a handshake, but the Jotok didn't. "Yes, we are Paradoxical, greatly pleased to meet you."

The Kzin snarled a question in the Heroes' Tongue. Everybody's translators murmured in chorus, "Is this the bridge?"

Quickpony said, "Bridge and lobby, they're the same space. You didn't know? We wondered why you never came around."

"I was not told of this option. There is merit in the posture that one species should not see another eat or mate or use the recycle port. But, LE Quickpony, your security is a joke! Bridge and passengers and no barrier? When did you begin building ships this way?"

Captain Preiss looked up. He said, "Software flies us. I can override, but I can disable the override. Hijackers can't affect that."

"What of your current problem? Did you record the Kzin's demand?" The Captain spoke a command.

A ghostly head and shoulders popped up on the holo-stage, pale orange but for two narrow, lofty black eyebrows. "I am Mee-rowreet. Call me Envoy. I speak for the Longest War."

My translator murmured, "Mee-rowreet, profession, manages livestock in a hunting park. Longest War, Kzin term for evolution."

The recording spoke Interworld, but with a strong accent and flat grammar. "We seek a fugitive. We have destroyed your gravity motors. We will board you following the Covenants sworn at Shasht at twenty-five naught five your dating. Obey, never interfere," the ghost head and voice grew blurred, "give us what we demand. You will all survive."

"The signal was fuzzed out by distance," Captain Preiss said. "The ship came up from behind and passed us at two hundred KPS relative, twenty minutes after we dropped out of hyperdrive. It's ahead of us by two light-minutes, decelerated to match our speed."

I said, speaking low, "Pleasemadam," alerting my pocket computer, "seek interstellar law, document Covenants of Shasht date twenty-five-oh-five. Run it."

Fly-By-Night looked up into the dome. "Your intruder?"

We were deep into the Nursery Nebula. All around were walls of tenuous interstellar dust lit from within. In murky secrecy, intersecting shock waves from old supernovae were collapsing the interstellar murk into hot whirlpools that would one day be stars and solar systems. Out of view below us, light pressure from something

bright was blowing columns and streams of dust past us. It all took place in an environment tens of light-years across. Furious action seemed frozen in time.

We had played at viewing the red whorl overhead. In IR you saw only the suns, paired protostars lit by gravitational collapse and the tritium flash, that had barely begun to burn. UV and X-ray showed violent flashes and plumes where planetesimals impacted, building planets. Neutrino radar showed structure forming within the new solar system.

We could not yet make out the point mass that would bend our course into the Tao Gap and out into free space. Turnpoint Star was a neutron star a few miles across, the core left by a supernova. But stare long enough and you could make out an arc on the sky, the shock wave from that same stellar explosion, broken by dust clouds collapsing into stars.

My seek system chimed. I listened to my wrist computer:

At the end of the Fourth Man-Kzin War, the Human Space Trade Alliance annexed Shasht and renamed the planet Fafnir, though the long, rocky, barren continent kept its Heroes' Tongue name. The Covenants of Shasht were negotiated then. We were to refrain from booting Kzinti citizens off Fafnir. An easy choice: they prefer the continent, whereas humans prefer the coral islands. They were already expanding an interstellar seafood industry into Patriarchy space. In return, and having little choice, the Patriarch barred himself, his clan and all habitats under his command, all others to be considered outlaw, from various acts. Eating of human meat... willful destruction of habitats... biological weapons of certain types... killing of Legal Entities, that word defined by a long list of exclusions, a narrower definition than in most human laws.

Futz, I wasn't a Legal Entity! Or I wouldn't be if they learned who I was.

Quickpony projected a virtual lens on the dome. I'd finish listening later. The Kzinti ship and its boat, vastly magnified, showed black with the red whorl behind them. There was enough incident light to pick out some detail. For a bare instant we had seen the intruder coming up behind us, just as our drive juddered and died and left us floating. After it slowed to a relative stop, a boat had detached. The approaching boat blocked off part of the ship. Gamma rays

impacting their magnetic shields made two arcs of soft white glow. Ship and boat bore the same glowing markings.

The ship was moving just as we were, its drive off, falling through luminous murk toward Turnpoint Star at a tenth of lightspeed.

First Officer Helm said, "*Odysseus'* security systems can deal with hijackers, but they're just not much use against an armed warship. Is that what we're seeing?"

"I see a small warship designed for espionage and hunting. I don't know the make. My knowledge is too old. The name reads *Sraff-zisht*." My translator said, "*Stealthy mating*."

Fly-By-Night continued, "Captain, I can't see, are there magnetic moorings on *Sraff-zisht*?"

"No need. Those big magnets on the boat would lock to the ship's gamma ray shielding."

"The boat is armed, the ship is not? There is no bay for the boat? Understood. Leave the boat in hiding among asteroids. Land an unarmed converted cargo ship on any civilized world. Yes?"

"Speculative," Preiss said.

"Do you recognize the weapon?"

"No. I assume it's what burned out our thrusters... our gravity motors." I sat and dialed a cappuccino. The Kzin joined me, dwarfing the booth. I dialed another with double milk, thinking he ought to try it.

The other passengers shrank back a little and waited. Any human being knows how to fear a Kzin.

I said, speaking low, "Pleasemadam, seek Heroes' Tongue references, *stealthy mating*, literal, no reference to rape." There had to be a way to narrow that further. I guessed: "Seek biological references only. Run it."

Fly-By-Night tasted the cappuccino.

Captain Preiss said, "Why would they be interested in us?"

"In me. The boat is close." Fly-By-Night sipped again. "Do you know of the *Angel's Pencil*?"

The Kzin was speaking Interworld as smoothly as if he'd grown up with the language. Some of us gaped. But his first words to me had been Interworld, after I startled and angered him... and he liked cappuccino.

Fly-By-Night said, "*Angel's Pencil* was a slowboat, one of Sol system's slower-than-light colony craft. Four hundred years ago, *Angel's Pencil* sent word of our coming. Sol system was given years to prepare. My ancestor Shadow contrived to board *Pencil* after allying himself with a human captive, Selena Guthlac. He and she joined their crew."

"That must have been one *futz* of a makeup job," Nicolaus Van Zild said.

"He had to stoop and keep his ears folded, and depilate! Whose story is this, boy?" Nicolaus grinned. The Kzin said, "*Angel's Pencil's* crew had already destroyed *Tracker*. They later destroyed *Gutting Claw*, the first and second kills of the First War, not bad for a ship with no intended armaments. "*Pencil* was forced to pass through Patriarchy space before they found a world to settle. None of those ramscoop ships were easy to turn, and none were built for more than one voyage. We were ninety light-years from Earth. One hundred and six years had passed on Earth."

I asked, "We?"

"*Gutting Claw's* Telepath, later named Shadow, is our first sire. *Pencil* rescued six females from the Admiral's harem. Our species have lived together on Sheathclaws for three hundred years. We remained cut off. Any message laser aimed at human space would pass through the Patriarchy. We spoke with no sapient species, we did not even know of faster-than-light travel, until..." Fly-By-Night looked up.

Stealthy-Mating's boat had arrived. We were looking directly into an obtrusively large electromagnetic weapon.

Nicolaus asked, "Can you read minds?"

"No, child. Some of us are good at guessing, but we don't have the drug. Where was I?" Fly-By-Night said, "They told me in the hospital after my first failed name quest. The universe had opened up-" He cut himself off as a furry face popped into hologram space in the workstation.

"I am Envoy. I speak for the Longest War. Terminate your spin. Open the airlock."

Captain Preiss nodded to Quickpony. Reaction motors whispered, slowing us. Fly-By-Night spoke more rapidly. "Boarding seems imminent. You cannot protect me. Give me to them. If you live long

enough to speak to your people, tell them that three grown males left Sheathclaws on our name quests. Half our genes derive from Shadow, from a telepath. The Patriarch needs telepaths. Now he will learn of a world peopled by *Gutting Claw's* telepath, none of whom has felt the addiction to *sthondat* lymph in three hundred years."

Gravity eased away until sideways thrust was all there was, and then that was gone too. *Odysseus'* outer airlock door opened.

The boat thumped into place against our hull. The older Van Zilds and I had our seat webs in place. The children floated, clinging to the arms of couches. "They will have my genes. They will find Sheathclaws," Fly-By-Night concluded. "You will face my children in the next war, if they have their way." Two big pressure-suit shapes left the boat on jet packs. One entered the lock. We heard it cycle. The other waited on the hull, to shoot the dome out if he saw resistance.

The inner door opened. The armored Kzin entered in a leap, up and into the dome where his companions could see him, a half turn to keep us in view. In his hand was a light that he aimed like a weapon. He was graceful as a fish. I squinted to save my vision. The light played over every part of the lobby and workstation. What he saw must have been reassuring.

Envoy said, "We have demands. The Covenants will be followed where possible. All losses will be paid. Give us your passenger. He is in violation of our law. Fly-By-Night, is this Jotok your slave?"

"Yes."

"Fly-By-Night, Jotok, you must enter your vacuum packs. Fly-By-Night, give your *w'tsai* to Packer."

"*W'tsai*?" Fly-By-Night asked. "This? My knife?"

"Carefully."

Giving up his *w'tsai* was the ultimate surrender. If I knew that from my reading, surely a Kzin knew it. Three hundred years among humans... Had they lost the tradition?

But Fly-By-Night was offering a silver knife-prong-spoon ten inches long and dark with tarnish.

A spoony? We ate with those! They matched several shapes of digits and were oversized for human hands. *Odysseus'* kitchen melted the silver to kill bacteria, then squirted it into molds for the next meal.

Packer took it, stared at it, then showed it to Envoy's hologram. Envoy snarled in the Heroes' Tongue. He wasn't buying it.

Our passenger answered in Interworld. "Yes, mine! See, here is my symbol," the sign of Outbound Enterprises, a winged craft black against a crescent world. "Fly by night!"

A laugh would be bad. I looked at the children. They looked solemn. Of Packer's weapon I saw only a glare of light. But he held it on Fly-By-Night as if it had to fire something deadly, and he snarled a command and lashed out with his tail. Under the minor impact Fly-By-Night spun slowly so that Packer could examine him for more weapons.

He snarled again. Fly-By-Night and Paradoxical pulled tabs on vacuum packs. The packs popped into double-walled spheres. Held open by higher pressure, the collar on each refuge inflated like a pair of fat lips.

Fly-By-Night had trouble wriggling through the collar. Once inside he had room. These vacuum refuges would have held the whole Van Zild family. Paradoxical looked quite lost in his.

Envoy spoke. "Captain, you carry human passengers frozen in three cargo modules. Release these modules."

The world went gray.

I began to breath deep and hard, to hyper-oxygenate, because I dared not faint. Captain Preiss' hands hadn't moved. That was brave, but it wouldn't save anyone. The elder Van Zilds buried their faces in each other's shoulders. The children were horrified and fascinated. They watched everything. Once I caught them looking at their parents in utter contempt.

Like them, I had been half enjoying the situation.

This would have been my last interstellar flight. Chance had me riding not as frozen cargo, but as a passenger, aware and entertained.

Flying the ship would have been more fun, of course.

Quickpony had suggested joining our cabins, as we were the obvious unpaired pair. I showed Quickpony videos displayed by the circuitry in my ring. Our lockstep ceremony. Jenna/Jeena just a year old. Sharrol/Milcenta not yet pregnant again; I should have updated while I could. We are lockstepped, see, here is our ring. Quickpony admired and dropped the subject.

And that left what for entertainment?

Kzinti hijackers!

I'd treated it like a game until *Stealthy-Mating* claimed my family. Bound into my couch by a crash web, I let my hand rest on the release while I considered what weapons I might have at hand.

Lips drawn back, fangs showing, Envoy's speech was turning mushy. "Examine the Covenants, Captain Preiss. They were never altered. We take only hostages. They will be returned unharmed when our needs are satisfied. Compensation will be paid for every cost incurred."

"What crime do you claim against Fly-By-Night?" Quickpony asked. "His ancestor committed treason against his officers and the Patriarch. Penalties hold against his blood line forever. We may claim his life, but we will not. We value his blood line."

"Has Fly-By-Night committed a crime?"

"False identity. Purchase of a Jotok without entitlement. Trivia." Dumb and happy Mart Graynor wasn't the type to carry weapons aboard a spacecraft. The recorded Covenant of 2505 might be the only weapon I had. I let it play in one ear. The old diplomatic language was murky.... Here it was. Hostages are to be returned in health if all conditions met, conditions not to be altered... costs to be assessed in time of peace at earliest ...

Was I supposed to bet lives on this?

Heidi asked, "Do you eat human meat?"

Packer and the hologram both turned to the girl. Envoy said, "Hostages. I have said. The Covenants say. Kitten, we consider human meat to be... *whasht-meery*... unsafe. Captain Preiss, the modules we want are all addressed to Outbound on Home, yes? We will deliver them. Else we would face all the navies of human space."

Preiss said, "I have no such confidence."

Packer kicked down from the dome. He set his huge hands on the girl's waist and looked into her face. He still hadn't spoken.

Nicolaus screamed and leapt. As he came at the armored Kzin, Packer reached out and wrapped both children against his armored chest. They looked up through the bubble helmet into a Kzin's smile.

Nicolaus bared his teeth.

Envoy said, "Pause, Packer! Captain Preiss, think! Without gravity generators you must still fall around Turnpoint Star and into flat space. Hyperdrive will take you to the edge of Home system. Call

for help to tow you the rest of the way. What other path have we? We might smash your hyperdrive and hyperwave and leave you to die here, silenced, but your absence at Home will set the law seeking us.

"This is the better risk, to violate no law unless we must. We take hostages. You must not call your authorities until you arrive near Home. We will transport our prisoner, then deliver your passengers."

Packer's arms were full of children: hampered. Preiss and Quickpony were on a hair trigger. I was unarmed, but if they moved, I would.

"Wait," Envoy said. Preiss still hadn't moved. "You carry stock from Shasht? Sea life?"

"Yes."

"I must speak with my leader. Lightspeed gap is two minutes each way. Do nothing threatening."

We heard Envoy yowling into his communicator. Then nothing.

My pocket computer dinged.

Everybody twitched, yeepped or looked around. Heidi floated to the rim of my booth and listened over my shoulder.

Sea lions around the Earth's poles live in large communities built around one alpha male, many females and their pups, and several beta males that live around the edges of the herd. When the alpha male is otherwise occupied, an exile may rush in and mate hurriedly with a female and escape. Several species of Earth's mammals have adapted such a breeding strategy, as have life forms on Kzin and even many Kzinti clans. Biologists, particularly reproductive biologists, call them sneaky-fuckers.

I said, "Maybe there's a more polite term for the journals. Anyway, good name for a spy ship. Please madam, seek Longest War plus Kzinti plus piracy, run it." We waited.

When Hans Van Hild couldn't stand the silence any more, he said, "Heidi, Nicolaus, I'm sorry. We should have let you grow up."

"Hans!"

"Yes, Hilde, there was all the time in the world. Hilde, there's never time. Never a way to know."

Envoy spoke. "Release one of the modules for Outbound Enterprises and two addressed to Neptune's Empire. The passengers will be returned. Neptune's Empire will be recompensed for their stock."

Fish?

Captain Preiss's fingertips danced. Three cargo modules slowly rose out of the rim. I felt utterly helpless.

Packer left the children floating. He pushed Fly-By-Night's balloon toward the airlock.

I said, "Wait."

The armored Kzin turned. I squinted against the glare of his weapon. "We do not permit slavery aboard *Odysseus*," I said. "*Odysseus* belongs to the Human Space Trade Alliance. The Jotok stays."

"Who are you? Where derives your authority?" Envoy demanded.

"Martin Wallace Graynor. No authority, but the law-"

"Fly-By-Night purchased a Jotok and holds him as property. We hold Fly-By-Night as property. Local law crawls before interspecies covenants. The Jotok comes. Are you concerned for the well-being of the Jotok?"

I said, "Yes."

"You shall observe if he is mistreated. Enter a vacuum refuge now." I caught Quickpony's horror. She spun around to search her screen display of the Covenants for some way to stop this. Packer pulled Fly-By-Night toward the airlock. He wasn't waiting.

Neither did I. I launched myself gently toward the refuge that held the Jotok. It would not have occurred to me to hug the only available little girl before I disappeared into the Nursery Nebula. I launched, Heidi launched, and she was in my path, arms spread, bawling. I hugged her, let our momentum turn us, whispered something reassuring and let go. She drifted toward a wall, I toward the Jotok's bubble.

She'd put something bulky in my zip pocket.

I crawled through the collar into the Jotok's vacuum refuge and zipped the lips closed.

Packer pushed Fly-By-Night into the airlock, closed it, cycled it. His armored companion on the hull pulled the bubble into space. Packer came back for us and cycled us through.

Two bubbles floated outside *Odysseus*, slowly rotating, slowly diverging. Packer was still in *Odysseus*.

The boat jerked into motion. We watched as it maneuvered above one of the brick-shaped cargo modules attached to *Odysseus*. A pressure-armored Kzin stood below, guiding.

Nobody was coming after us.

The Jotok asked, "Martin, was that sane? What were you thinking?" I said, "Please madam, seek interspecies diplomacy plus Kzinti plus Longest War. Run it. Paradoxical, I was thinking of a rescue. I tried to bust you loose. You know more about Fly-By-Night than I could ever learn. I need what you can tell me."

"You have no authority to question us," the Jotok said, "unless you hold ARM authority."

I laughed harder than he would have expected. "I'm not an ARM. No authority at all. Do you want Fly-By-Night freed? Do you want your own freedom?" "We had that! LE Graynor, when Fly-By-Night bought us from the orange underground market on Shasht, he swore to free us. On Sheathclaws chains of lakes run from mountains to sea. We would have bred in their lakes. All of the Jotoki populace of Sheathclaws would be our descendants. We have been robbed of our destiny!"

I asked, "Did Fly-By-Night take more slaves than just you?"

"No."

"Then who did you expect to mate with?"

"We are five! Jotoki grow like your eels, not sapient. Reach first maturity, seek each other, cluster in fives. Brains grow links. Reach second maturity, seek a lake, divide, breed and die, like your salmon. LE Mart, you yourselves are two minds joined by a structure called corpus callosum. Join is denser in Kzinti, that species has less redundancy, but still brain is two lobes. We are five lobes, narrow joins. Almost individuals cooperate, Par-Rad-Doc-Sic-Cal, Doc talks, Par walks, Cal for fine-scale coordination. Almost five-lobe mind, sometimes lock in indecision. In trauma or in fresh water we may divide again. May join again to cluster differently, different person. You perceive?" *Futz*, it was an interesting picture, but I'd never grasp what it was like to be Jotok. The point was that Paradoxical was a breeding population. I asked, "Are you hungry? What do you eat?"

"Privately."

"Didn't Fly-By-Night see you eat?"

"Only once."

I'd put a handmeal in my pocket, but I wouldn't eat in front of Paradoxical after that. "Orange market?"

"An extensive market exists among the Shasht Kzinti. They trade intelligence, electronics, stolen goods and slaves. Shasht the continent is nearly lifeless. They seeded several lakes for our breeding and confinement, but without maintenance they die off. The trade could be stopped. Our lakes must show a different color from orbit. I surmise the law has no interest."

"You once held an interstellar empire-"

"My master tells me so. The slavers don't teach us. Properly speaking, they do not hold slaves at all. They hold fish ponds. When a purchaser wants a Jotok, five swimming forms are allowed to assemble. Our master is the first thing we see."

"Who chose your name?"

"My master. I am free and slave, many and one, land and sea dweller, a paradox." "He really does think in Interworld, doesn't he? They must teach kzinti as a second language."

A magnetic grapple locked in place, and the first module came free. My pocket computer dinged. We listened:

Longest War, a political entity never named until after the Second War With Men, has since been claimed by many Kzinti groups. It may appear in connection with piracy, disappearing LEs or disappearing ships, but never an action against planets or a major offensive. Claim has been made, never proved, that Longest War are any Patriarch's servants whom the Patriarch must disclaim. We surmise also that the Longest War names any group who hope for the eye of the Patriarch. Events include 2399 Serpent Swarm, 2410 Kdat

* * *

Fly-By-Night had drifted so far that he was hard to find, just a twinkle of lensed light as starfog glow passed behind his vac refuge. Why didn't they retrieve him? Was it really Fly-By-Night they wanted, or something else? I watched *Stealthy-Mating's* boat retrieve a second cargo module. They weren't being careful. Two of those boxes held only Fafnir's thousand varieties of fish, but the other... was in a quantum state. It held and did not hold Sharrol/Milcenta and Jenna/Jeena, until some observer could open the module. In all the years I'd flown for Nakamura Lines, I had never seen a vac pack used. Light-years from any world, miles from any ship, with nothing

but clear plastic skin between me and the ravenous vacuum... it seemed a good time to look it over.

This wasn't the brand we'd carried. It was newer, or else a more expensive model.

Loops of tough ribbon hung everywhere: handholds. Air tank. A tube two liters in volume had popped out. Inner zip, outer zip: an airlock. We could be fed through that, or get rid of wastes... a matter I would not raise with Paradoxical just yet.

A light. A sleeve and glove taped against the wall, placed to reach the outer zip. Here was a valve... hmm... a valve ending in a little cone outside. Inside, a handle to aim it.

To any refugee there might come a moment when a jet is more important than breathing-air.

Not yet.

"Why would you want to rescue my master?" Paradoxical asked.

"They have my wife and daughter and unborn, one chance out of three. Two out of three they're still safe aboard *Odysseus*. Would you bet?"

"No Jotok knows his parent. Might you find another mate and generate more children?"

I didn't answer.

"How do you like your battle plan so far?"

I couldn't hear sarcasm, but I inferred it. I said, "I have a spare vac pack. So does Fly-By-Night. Did you see what he did? He triggered a pack on the wall. Kept his own. And Heidi passed me something."

"What did the girl give you?"

"Might be some kind of toy."

The Jotok said, "Mee-rowreet means make slaves and beasts go where can be killed. Not Envoy. *Whasht-meery* means infested or diseased, too rotted or parasitical for even a starving predator. Prey that dies too easily, opponent who exposes belly too soon, is suspect *whasht-meery*."

I waited for our spin to hide me from *Stealthy-Mating's* telescopes before I pulled Heidi's gift free.

It was foam plastic, light and bulky. A toy needle gun. If this was real, her parents... Wait, now, Heidi was almost forty years old!

They wouldn't think quite like human adults, these children, but their brains were as big as they were going to get. Their parents

might want them able to protect themselves... and if not, she and her brother had spent decades learning how to manipulate their parents.

I couldn't test it.

"Needle gun. Anesthetic crystals," I told Paradoxical. "They won't get through armor. One wouldn't knock out a Kzin anyway. Better than nothing, though. Where is Fly-By-Night's *w'tsai*?"

"You saw."

"Paradoxical, we are in too much trouble to be playing children's games." Paradoxical said nothing.

Stealthy-Mating's boat locked on to the third cargo module.

I said, "That was fun to watch, though. Giving Packer silverware!" Paradoxical rotated to show me his mouth.

I saw a star of tentacles around a circle of lip enclosing five circles of tiny teeth in a pentagon. Something emerged from one circle of teeth. Paradoxical vomited up a long, narrow, padded mailing bag. I pulled it free, unzipped it, and had a yard of blade and handle.

The blade looked like dark steel. The light caught a minute ripple effect... but it was all wrong. To my fingertip's touch the ripple was just a picture. The blade weighed almost nothing. The weight was all in the handle.

In the end of the hilt was a small black enamel bat. Bats exist only on Earth and in the zoo on Jinx, but that ancient Batman symbol has gone to every human world. Fly by night.

Futz, I had to try it on something.

My lockstep ring had a silver case. That's a soft metal, but the blade only scratched it. I tested my thumb on the edge, gingerly. Blunt.

Customs change. A weapon can be purely ceremonial... but why make the handle so heavy? Why was Paradoxical watching me?

Because it was a puzzle.

Push the enamel bat. Nothing.

Wiggle the blade. Push it in, risk my fingers, feel it give. A Kzin could push harder. Nothing? Pull out, and my fingertips felt a hum. The look of the blade didn't change. Carefully now, don't touch the edge

It sliced neatly through my lockstep ring, with a moment's white sputter as circuitry burned out. The cut edges of the classic silver

band shone like little mirrors. There should have been some resistance.

A variable-knife is violently illegal: hair-fine wire in a magnetic field, all edge and no blade, thin enough to slice through walls and machinery. Often enough it hurts the wielder. When it's off it's all handle, and the handle is heavy: it holds the coiled wire and the mag generator.

This toy was similar, but with a blade of fixed length, harder to hide. More sporting. A groove around the edge housed the wire until magnets raised it for action.

The onyx bat was recessed now. I pushed and it popped out. The vibration stopped.

We had a weapon.

What was keeping Packer? They had the telepath, they had hostages, they had two modules of Fafnir seafood. What was left to do in there? Get on with it. I had a weapon!

"Wait before you use it. I know my master," the Jotok said. "He will take command of the boat. The larger ship is weaponless against it."

"Paradoxical, he'd be fighting at least three warriors trained in free fall. Don't forget the pilots. Four if we get as far as the ship."

"*Whasht-meery* may currently be on autopilot or remote. Possession of armor does not imply training. Fly-By-Night was a champion wrestler before he was injured. We fear you're right. But we must try!"

"Wrestler?"

"He tells me they fight with capped claws on Sheathclaws."

Somehow I was not reassured.

Packer emerged.

He and his companion jetted toward Fly-By-Night's bubble. They pulled Fly-By-Night toward the boat. Clamshell doors opened around the snout of the solenoid weapon. The three disappeared inside.

I safed and wrapped the *w'tsai* and gave it to the Jotok. He swallowed it, and the needler after it. He must have a straight gut... five straight guts, I thought, like fish or worms all merged at the head.

The two armored Kzinti came for us. They towed us toward the boat. The boat was a thick lens, like *Odysseus* but smaller. The

modules were anchored against one side. The other side was two transparent clamshell doors with the hollow solenoid sticking out between them.

The doors closed over us.

The interior had been arrayed around the solenoid weapon. There were lockers. Hatch in the floor, a smaller airlock. A kitchen wall big enough for a cruise ship, with a gaping intake hopper. A big box, detachable, with a door in it. I took that for a shower/washroom. I didn't see a hologram stage or a mass pointer.

Mechanisms fed into the base of the main weapon. A feed for projectiles? The thing didn't just burn out electronics, it was a linear accelerator too, a cannon.

Fly-By-Night's vacuum refuge had been wedged between the cannon and the wall. He watched us.

The doors came down and now our balloon was wedged next to his. Gravity came on. *Stealthy-Mating's* crew anchored us with a spray of glue, while a third Kzin watched from the horseshoe of a workstation. The two took their places beside him.

Four chairs; three Kzinti all in pressure suit armor. There was no separate cabin because they might have to work the cannon. It could have been worse. They talked for a bit, mobile mouths snarling at each other inside fishbowl helmets. They fiddled with the controls. A sound of tigers fighting blasted from Paradoxical's backpack vest. My translator murmured, "So, Telepath! Welcome back to the Patriarch's service."

Two or three seconds of silence followed. In that moment *Odysseus* abruptly shrank to a toy and was gone. Disturbing eddies played through our bodies. The boat must be making twenty or thirty gravities, but it had good shielding. This was a warcraft.

Their prisoner decided to answer. "You honor me. You may call me LE Fly-By-Night."

"Honored you should be, Telepath, but your credit as a Legal Entity is forged, a telepath has no name, and Fly-By-Night is only a description, and in Interworld, too! Still you will command a harem before we do. We should envy you." That voice was Envoy's.

"Call me Fly-By-Night if I am expected to answer. Does the Patriarch still make addicts of any who show the talent?"

"You have hibernated for three centuries? We use advanced medical techniques in this age. Chemical mimic of *sthondat* lymph, six syllable name, more powerful, few side effects, diet additives to minimize those."

A second Kzin voice said, "You need not taste the drug yourself, Telepath, by my alpha officer's word."

"Only my poor kits, then. But how well do Kzinti keep each other's promises? I know that *Odysseus* was disabled despite all reassurance."

What? Fly-By-Night had no way to know that. I was only guessing, and his vac refuge had floated further from *Odysseus* than our own.

But Envoy said, "All follows the Covenants sworn with men at Shasht. That was my assurance, and it is good."

"Do those allow you to maroon a Legal Entity ship in deepspace?"

"Summon them. Read them."

"My servant carries my computer and disk library."

The pilot tapped; we heard a click, then silence.

Paradoxical turned off his talker. "We can use this to speak to my master, but they may listen. What can you say that those oversized intestinal parasites may hear too?"

"Right now, nothing. Thrusters were yours first, weren't they? Called the gravity planer?"

"Jotoki created gravity planers, yes. Kzinti enslaved us and stole the design. Your folk stole it from Kzinti invaders."

"Is there anything you know about thrusters that they don't? Something that might help?"

"No. Idiot. What we learned of gravity motors, we learned from Kzinti!" "Futz-"

"I had thought," Paradoxical said carefully, "that they would not keep their control room in vacuum."

"Their hostages are all frozen. Can't fight. Can't escape. Maybe they like that? Anything we try now would leave us dying in vacuum. How long can a Jotok stand vacuum?"

"A few seconds, then death."

"Humans can take a few minutes." Humans had, and survived. It was rare. "I might go blind first. Do you mind if I think out loud for a bit?"

"Do you talk to yourself to move messages across that narrow structure in your brain, the corpus callosum?"

"I have no idea." So I talked across my corpus callosum. "This is bad, but it could be worse. We might have been in a separate cargo hold, still in vacuum and locked out of a flight cabin."

"Rejoice."

"I thought I wouldn't have to worry about *Odysseus*. The ship's on a free fall course around Turnpoint Star, through the Gap and into free space. They still had hyperdrive and hyperwave and the attitude jets, last I saw. Attitude jets are just fusion reaction motors. That won't take them anywhere. Hyperdrive only works in flat space, so it won't get them into a solar system. They could still cross to Home system, call for help and get a tow. Two weeks?"

"Envoy said all of that to Captain Preiss. Wait-but-stop-didn't Envoy confess otherwise?"

"I heard. *Futz*." Fly-By-Night had done that very cleverly. But Envoy hadn't confessed; he had only insisted that he had not violated the Covenants. "We'd better assume Packer shot up the control board. That would leave *Odysseus* as an inert box of hostages. Leave them falling. Retrieve them later." Paradoxical said nothing.

"Next problem. Fly-By-Night can't get out of his refuge."

"Surely-"

"No, look, he can't slash his way out. He's got only his claws. He can zip it open. All the air spews out, and now he can try to get through the opening. He's too big. He'd die in vacuum while he was trying to wiggle free with those three laughing at him."

"Yes. Less than flexible, human and Kzinti. Are you small enough to get through the collar?"

"Yes." I was pretty sure. "Now, we can't warn Fly-By-Night. Any fighting, I'll have to start it. You're dead if I slash the refuge open, so I don't. I unzip it. Air pressure blows me out, poof. You zip it behind me quick so the refuge re-inflates. I'm in vacuum. I slash Fly-By-Night's refuge wide open and hand him the *w'tsai*. We're both fighting in vacuum against three Kzinti in pressure armor. How does it sound?"

"Beyond madness."

"There's no point anyway. If we could take the boat, we still couldn't break lightspeed, because the hyperdrive motor is on the ship. We'd die of old age here in the Nursery Nebula."

"You don't have a plan?"

I was still feeling it out. "The only way out has us waiting for these bandits to berth the boat to *Stealthy-Mating*. Maybe it's a good thing Fly-By-Night doesn't have his *w'tsai*. Kzinti self-control is... there's a word-" "Oxymoron. But my master integrates selves well."

"They'll have to move the cargo modules inside the ship. Can't leave them where they are, they're blocking the magnets, the docking points. Where does that leave us? Whatever we do, we want the ship and the boat. After they birth the boat, likely enough they'll still leave the cabin in vacuum and us in these bubbles."

"My kind can survive six days without food. Two without water."

Two of the Kzinti crew might have been asleep. The third wasn't doing much. One presently stirred-Envoy, by his suit markings-got up and disappeared into the big box with a door in it. Fifteen minutes later he was back. Wouldn't a shower or a toilet have to be under pressure?

I watched my alien companions and my alien enemies. I watched the magnificent pageant of stars being born. I thought and I read.

Read everything.

Covenants of 2505. Commentary, then and recent. Kzinti sociology. Revisions: what constitutes torture... loss of limbs and organs... sensory deprivation. Violations. The right to a speedy trial, to speedy execution, not to be evaded. What is a Legal Entity....

Male Kzinti were LEs. A computer program was not. Heidi and Nicolaus were not, poor kids, but Kzin kittens weren't either; it was a matter of maturity as an evolved being. Jotoki and Kdat were LEs unless legitimately enslaved. Entities with forged identities were not. Ice Class passengers were LEs. Good! Was there a rule against lying to hostages? Of course not, but I looked.

Paradoxical produced a computer from his backpack and went to work. I didn't ask what he might be learning.

I did not see Fly-By-Night tearing at his prison. When I caught his eye, I clawed at my own bubble. Our captors might be reassured if they saw some sign of hysterics, of despair.

He didn't take the hint.

Maybe I had him all wrong.

A telepath born among the Kzinti will be found as a kzitten, conscripted, and addicted to chemicals to bring out his ability. Telepaths detect spies and traitors; they assist in jurisprudence; they gradually go crazy. Alien minds drive them crazy much faster.

If a telepath feels an opponents' pain, he can't easily fight for mates. For generations the Patriarchy discouraged their telepaths from breeding. Then, battling an alien enemy during the Man-Kzin Wars, they burned them out. Probably Envoy had spoken truth: what the Kzinti wanted from Fly-By-Night was more telepaths.

They'd get the location of Sheathclaws out of him. After they had what they wanted, they'd give him a harem. They'd imprison him in luxury. Envoy had said they wouldn't force the drug on him; it might be true.

A Kzin might settle for that.

I could come blasting out of my plastic bottle, screaming my air away, *w'tsai* swinging... cut him loose, and find myself fighting alone while he blew up another bubble for himself.

Fly-By-Night floated quite still, very relaxed, ears folded. He might have been asleep. He might have been watching his three captors guide the boat toward *Stealthy-Mating*.

I watched their ears. Ears must make it hard for a Kzin to lie. Lying to a hologram might be easier... and they wouldn't have called him Envoy for nothing.

Flick-flick of ears, bass meeping, a touch on the controls. We were flying through a lethal intensity of gamma rays.

The Jotok's armtips rippled over his keyboard. His computer was a narrow strip of something stiff; he'd glued or velcroed it to the bubble wall. The keyboard and holoscreen were projections. I knew the make-"Paradoxical? Isn't that a Gates Quintillian?"

"Yes. Human-built computers are superior to Patriarchy makes."

"Oh, that explains the corks! Fly-By-Night's fingers are too big for the keyboard, so he puts corks on his nails!"

The Jotok said, "You are Beowulf Shaeffer."

I spasmed like an electrocuted frog, then turned to gawk at him. "How can you possibly... ?"

How can you possibly think that a seven foot tall albino has lost fourteen inches of height and got himself curly black hair and a tan?

Hair dye and tannin secretion pills, and *futz* that, we had real trouble. I asked, "Have you spent three hours researching me?"

"You are the only ally at hand. I need to understand you better. You are wanted by the ARM for conspiracy abduction, four counts."

"Four?"

"Sharrol Janss, Carlos Wu, and two children. Feather Filip is your suspect coconspirator. ARM interest seems to lie in the lost genes of Carlos Wu, but Sharrol Janss is alleged to be a flat phobe, hence would never have left Earth willingly."

"We all ran away together."

"My interest lies in your abilities, not your crimes. You were a civilian spacecraft pilot. Were you trained for agility in free fall?"

"Yes. Any emergency in a spacecraft, gravity is the first thing that goes." "You're agile if you've escaped the ARM thus far. What has your reading gained you?"

"We have to live. We have to win."

"These would be good ideas-"

"No, you don't get it." The Jotok had to understand. "The Covenants of 2505 permit taking of hostages. They only put restrictions on their treatment. I've played those *futz* documents three times through. *Odysseus* is hostages-in-a-box, live and frozen. They won't starve. Envoy can take Fly-By-Night anywhere he likes, however long it takes, then come back and release *Odysseus*. It's all in the Covenants."

"If anything goes wrong," Paradoxical said, "they would never come." "No, it's worse than that! If everything goes right for them, there's no good reason to go back unless it's to fill the food lockers! The Covenants only apply when you're caught. My family is one hundred percent dead if we can't change that."

"Envoy's word may be good. No! Bad gamble. We should study the pot odds. Beowulf, have you evolved a plan?"

"I don't know enough."

The three crew were awake now, watching us as we watched them, though mostly they watched Fly-By-Night.

Paradoxical's talker burst to life. My translator said, "Tell us of the fight that injured you."

Fly-By-Night was slow to answer. "Sheathclaws folk are fond of hang gliding. We make much bigger hang gliders for Kzinti, and not

so many of us fly. I was near grown, seeking a name. My intent was to fly from Blood Park to Touchdown, three hundred clicks along rocky shore and then inland, at night. Land in Offcentral Park. Startle humans into fits."

Packer snarled, "Startling humans is no fit way to earn a name!" and the unnamed Kzin asked, "Wouldn't the thermals be different at night?"

Fly-By-Night said, "Very different."

"Your second naming quest brought you here," Envoy stated.

"Yes. I hoped that a scarred Kzin might pass among other Kzinti. Challenge would be less likely. Any lapse in knowledge might be due to head injury. I might pass more easily on a world part Kzin and part human, like Shasht-Fafnir." "You dance lightly over an important matter. Who lifted you from your world?" "Where would be my honor if I told you that?"

"Smugglers? Bandits? What species? You will give us that too, Nameless." We heard the click: communication severed.

One of the Kzinti stood up. Another slashed the vacuum, a mere wrist gesture, but the first sat down again. The stars wheeled... and something that was not a star came into view, brilliant in pure laser colors: *Stealthy-Mating's* riding lights.

I said, "We're about to dock. If anything happens, you keep the needle sprayer, I want the blade. Closing the zipper turns on the air, so don't lose that." "No fear," said Paradoxical.

Gravity went away. We floated. The ships danced about each other. I would have docked less recklessly. I'm not a Kzin.

"They know too much about us," I said.

Paradoxical asked, "In what context?"

"They knew our manifest. They knew our position-"

"Finding another ship in interstellar space is not a thing they could plan, Beowulf."

"LE Graynor to you. Look at it this way," I said. "The only way to get here, falling through the Tao Gap in Einstein space, is to be going from Fafnir to Home. *Stealthy-Mating* got our route somehow. They started later with a faster ship. They might catch us approaching Home during deceleration... track our graviton wake... or snatch you and Fly-By-Night after you got through Customs. They could not

possibly have expected to find *Odysseus* here. Catching us here was a fluke, an opportunity. They grabbed it."

"As you say."

"I like it."

Paradoxical stared. "Do you? Why?"

"Clients, overlords, allies, any kind of support would have to be told that *Stealthy-Mating* is en route to Home. Any rendezvous with *Stealthy-Mating* is at Home. When could they change that? They're still headed for Home!" "Very speculative."

"I know."

Stealthy-Mating's cargo bay was bigger than the boat's, under doors that opened like wings.

The boat released the cargo modules. Two Kzinti went out and began moving them. Envoy stayed behind. He watched the action in space, ignoring us. "Not yet," Paradoxical said. I nodded. Fly-By-Night floated half curled up. He seemed to be asleep, but his ears kept flicking open like little fans. I ate my handmeal. Paradoxical averted its eyes.

Packer and the nameless third crewperson set the modules moving one by one, and juggled them as they approached *Stealthy-Mating*. Waldo arms reached up to pull them into the bay and lock them. It seemed to take forever, but I'd have moved those masses one at a time. They were in a hurry. Rounding a point mass would scatter this loose stuff all across the sky.

Turnpoint Star must be near.

The cargo doors closed. *Stealthy-Mating* rotated, and the boat was pulled down against the hull. Now we were all one mass.

The hatch in the floor opened. Three Kzinti came through in pressure suits to join Envoy. The newcomer's chest and back showed a Kzinti snarl done in gaudy orange dots-and-commas. He spared a glance for me and Paradoxical, then turned to Fly-By-Night.

My translator said, "I am Meebrlee-Riit."

"Futz!" Fly-By-Night exclaimed in Interworld.

"Your concern is noted. Yes, I am of the Patriarch's line. Your First Sire was *Gutting Claw's* Telepath, who betrayed the Patriarch Rrowrreet-Riit and showed prey how to destroy his own ship!"

"And he never even went back for the ears. Then again, they were inside a hot plasma," Fly-By-Night said.

To Envoy Meebrlee-Riit said, "This one was to be tamed."

Envoy cringed, ears flat. Even I could hear the change in his voice, the whine. "Dominant One, this fool crippled himself for a failed joke, and that joke was his name quest! A lesser male he must be, never mated. His arrogance is bluff or insanity, or else life among humans has made him quite alien! But let Tech give us air pressure, release the telepath, and the stench of your rage will cow him soon enough!"

"Let us expend less effort than that." Meebrlee-Riit turned back to Fly-By-Night. "Telepath, your life may be taken by any who happen upon you." "Did you need my consent for this?"

"No!"

"Or my First Sire's confession? That may be summoned by any Sheathclaws' school program. Then what shall we discuss? Tell us how you gained your name." "I was born to it, of course. Let us discuss your future."

"I have a future?"

"Your blood line may be forgiven. You may keep your slaves, such as they are, and a harem of my choosing--"

"Yours? Dominant One, forgive my interruption, please continue." Even if he was familiar with human sarcasm, it wasn't likely Meebrlee-Riit had been getting it from Kzinti! I'd read that Kzinti telepaths were flighty, not terribly bright. Meebrlee-Riit spoke more slowly. "Yes, my choosing! You may live your life in honor and luxury, or you may die shredded by my hands." "Meebrlee-Riit, you would not expect me to leap into so difficult a decision. Will you bargain for the lives of your hostages?"

"Submissive and unarmed Humans." Meebrlee-Riit sneezed his contempt. "But what would you bargain with? Your world?"

"Only my genes. Consider," said Fly-By-Night. In the Heroes' Tongue his speech was a long snarl, but the translation sounded placid enough. "He who is obeyed, who fights best, who mates is the alpha, the dominant one. You command that I mate? How will you persuade me that I am dominant? Submit to this one easy demand. Rescue my erstwhile hosts. Release them at Home."

"Why would I want you in rut? There are no females aboard *Sraff-Zisht*. Packer, Envoy, you remain. Leave the gravity off. Tech, with me. Turnpoint Star is near."

Two Kzinti went through the hatch. Two took their seats. Their hands were idle. Now the boat rode *Stealthy-Mating* like a parasite.

I asked, "Can you see Turnpoint Star?"

"At point six kilometers across? You flatter me. I surmise it may be centered in that curdle," said Paradoxical.

Curdle? The tight little knot of glowing gas? I watched, watched... A red point blew up into a blue-white sun and I fell into it. The stars wheeled. The balloons that housed us rippled as if batted by invisible children. My body rippled too.

I'd been through this once, but much worse. I clutched the ribbon handholds in a death grip. I howled.

It only lasted seconds, but the terror remained. One of the Kzinti pointed at me and both laughed with their teeth showing.

Packer made his way to the shower/toilet. The other, Envoy, stayed at the board to look for tidal damage.

Fly-By-Night took handholds, subtly braced, ears spread wide. His eye caught mine. I said, "Paradoxical, now."

Paradoxical splayed itself like a starfish across the wall of the refuge, just next to the opening. It disgorged the handle of the *w'tsai*.

I pulled the wrapped blade from its gullet and stripped off the casing. Clutched the blade against me, exhaled hard, opened the zipper all in one sweep, smooth as silk. Pressure popped me out into the cabin, straight toward Envoy's back, screaming to empty my lungs before they exploded.

Push the blade in, pull out, feel the vibration.

I had thought to recoil off a wall and slice Fly-By-Night free. That wasn't going to work. The Kzin diplomat saw my shadow and spun around. I slashed, aiming to behead him, and shifted the blade to catch the cat-quick sweep of his arm.

He swept his arm through the blade and whacked me under the jaw. That was a powerful blow. I spun dizzily away. His arm spun too, cut along a diagonal plane, spraying blood. Attached, it would have ripped my head off. I caught myself against a wall and leapt.

The seat web still held Envoy. His right arm and sleeve sprayed blood and air. Envoy smashed left-handed at the controls, then hit the seat web and leapt out of my path. I got his foot! The knife was hellishly sharp. My ears were roaring, my sight was going, but vacuum tore at him too as his arm and ankle jetted blood and air. His

balance was all off as he recoiled from the dome and came at me. He kicked. My angle was wrong and he grazed me.

Spinning, spinning, I starfished out so that the wall caught my momentum and killed my spin. I tried to find him.

The roar continued. My sight was foggy... no. The cabin was thick with fog. Fly-By-Night clawed his refuge wall, which had gone slack. We had air! I still didn't have time to free Fly-By-Night because-there he was! Envoy was back at the controls. I was braced to leap when a white glare blazed from his hand.

He had the gun.

I changed my jump. It took me behind the cannon. Two projectiles punched into the wall behind me. I swiped the *w'tsai* in a wide slash across Fly-By-Night's vacuum refuge, and continued falling toward the shower/toilet. Packer couldn't ignore Ragnarok forever.

The door opened in my face and I chopped vertically. Packer was naked. His left hand was on the door lock so I changed the cut, right to catch his free hand, his claws and the iron *w'tsai* he'd been holding. He whacked me hard but the blow was blunt. I spun once and crashed into Envoy and slashed.

Glimpsed Paradoxical behind him, braced myself and slashed. Paradoxical was firing anesthetic needles. The Kzin wasn't fighting back. I didn't see the implication so I kept slashing.

"Mart! LE Mart! Beowulf!"

I screamed, "What?" Disturbing me now could... what? Before me was a drifting cloud of blood and butchered meat. Paradoxical had stopped firing needles into it. Behind me, Fly-By-Night was on Packer's back, gnawing Packer's ear and fending off the hand that still had claws. Packer beat him with the blunted hand. They both looked trapped. Packer couldn't reach Fly-By-Night, but Fly-By-Night dared not let go.

I approached with care. Packer's arms were busy so he kicked to disembowel me. I chopped off what I could reach. Kick/slash, kick/slash. When he slowed down I killed him.

The air was thick with blood globules and red fog. We were breathing that *futz*. I got a cloth across my face. Fly-By-Night was snorting and sneezing. Paradoxical had placed meteor patches where Envoy had fired at me, but now he floated limp, maybe dying. I put him into the refuge and got him to zip it. Fly-By-Night went to the

controls. Minutes later we had gravity. All the scarlet goo settled to the floor and we could breathe.

I had gone berserk. Never happened before. My mind was slow coming back. Why was there air?

Air. Think now: I slashed Envoy's suit open. He pressurized the cabin to save his life. Paradoxical must have come out then. The Jotok's needles knocked Envoy out despite pressure armor... why? Because Paradoxical was putting needles into flesh wherever I'd slashed away the Kzin's armor. And of course I hadn't got around to releasing Fly-By-Night until late

I safed the blade. "Fly-By-Night? I believe this is yours."

He took it gingerly. "No witness would have guessed that," he said, and handed it back. "Clean it in the waterfall."

Kzinti custom: never borrow a *w'tsai*. If you do, return it clean. Waterfall? He meant the big box. The word was a joke. I found a big blanket made of sponge, a tube attached. When I wrapped it around the *w'tsai*, it left the blade clean. I tried it on myself. The blanket flooded me with soapy water, then clean water, then sucked me dry. Weird sensation, but I came out clean.

The toilet looked like an oval box of sand with foot- and handholds around it, though the sand stayed put. Later.

A pressure suit was splayed like a pelt against the wall for easy access. There was a status display. I couldn't read the glowing dots-and-commas, but the display must have told Packer there was air outside, and he'd come charging out. I was starting to shake.

I emerged from the waterfall box into a howling gale. The blood was all gone. I couldn't even smell it. Fly-By-Night and Paradoxical were at the kitchen wall feeding butchered meat into the hopper.

"This kind of thing must be normal on Patriarchy spacecraft," Fly-By-Night said cheerfully. "Holes in walls and machinery, blood and corpses everywhere, no problem. This hopper would hold a Great Dane... a big dog, Mart. The cleanup subsystem is running smooth as a human's arse." He saw my shivering. "You have killed. You should feed. Must your meat be cooked? I don't know that we have a heat source."

"Don't worry about it."

"I must. I'm hungry!" Fly-By-Night smiled widely. "You wouldn't like me hungry, would you?"

"*Futz*, no!" A Sheathclaws local joke? I tried to laugh. Shivering. Paradoxical was crawling over one of the control panels. "This kitchen was mounted separately. It is of Shashter manufacture, perhaps connected to the orange underground. It will feed slaves." It tapped at a surface, and foamy green stuff spilled into a plastic bag. Pond scum? It tapped again and the wall generated a joint of bloody meat. Again: it hummed and disgorged a layered brick.

A handmeal. While Paradoxical sucked at his bag of pond scum and Fly-By-Night devoured hot raw meat, I ate three handmeal bricks. They never tasted that good again.

Fly-By-Night had kept Packer's ears, one intact and one chewed to a nub, and Envoy's, both intact. These last he offered to me. "Your kill. Mart, I can dispose of-"

I took them. My kill.

We had taken the boat. Now what?

Fly-By-Night said, "The hard part will be persuading Meebrlee-Riit that all is well here." His voice changed. "Dominant One, all runs as planned but for the Telepath's behavior. Cowed by fear, he has soiled his refuge. Shall we clean him? It might be a trick-" Funny stuff. I was still shivering. "That's very good, I can't tell the difference, but Meebrlee-Riit or Tech might."

"Guide me."

"I can't find the hologram stage."

Fly-By-Night touched something. This whole side of the main weapon became a window, floor to dome, a gaudy panorama across orange veldt into a city of massive towers. We'd been prisoned on the other side of it.

I said, "Tanj! He'll see every hair follicle. All right, I'm still thrashing around here. We've got Packer's pressure suit. The orders were to leave the, ah, prisoners in vacuum and falling. Try this "Whenever Meebrlee-Riit calls, Packer is in the waterfall room." We hadn't heard enough of Packer's speech to imitate Packer. "LE Fly-By-Night, you're Envoy.

You're in the pressure suit, we're in the vac refuges. We'll have to change the markings on the suit. I'd say Envoy's move is to wait patiently for his Alpha Officer to call." I didn't like the taste of this. "He could catch us by surprise."

"I should find an excuse to call him."

"Anything goes wrong, you give us air instantly. Paradoxical, have you found an emergency air switch?"

"Here, then here."

"Stet. Envoy, what's wrong with your voice?"

"Nothing," said Fly-By-Night.

"Well, there had better be."

"Stet," the Kzin said. "And we don't really want vacuum, do we? Let's try this instead. I'm calling because we're not in vacuum, and my voice--"

And his tale was better than mine, so we worked on that.

We spent some time looking those controls over, trying a few things. We found air pressure, air mix, emergency pressure, cabin gravity, thrust. Weapons would be harder to test. There were controls you could hit by accident without killing anyone, and that was done with virtual control panels. Weapons and defenses were hardwired buttons and switches, a few of them under locked cages, all stiff enough but big enough that I could turn them on or off by jabbing with the heel of my hand. Paradoxical couldn't move those at all.

The hologram wall was the telescope screen too. Paradoxical got us a magnificent view back into the Nursery Nebula, all curdles and whorls of colored light. It found *Odysseus* a light-hour behind us, under spin and falling free with no sign of motive power, only a chain of corridor lights and the brighter glow of the lobby. That didn't tell us if they still had hyperdrive. They couldn't use it yet.

Ahead was nothing but distant stars. We had to be approaching flat space, where *Stealthy-Mating* could jump to hyperdrive.

Fly-By-Night was wearing Envoy's pressure suit. The markings were right. He would keep the right sleeve hidden. We had cut off part of the helmet, raggedly, to obscure his features. Now Fly-By-Night tapped at the kitchen wall. It disgorged a soft, squishy, dark red organ that might have been a misshapen human liver. He smeared blood over his face and chest, then into the exposed ear. My shivering became a violent shudder. Fly-By-Night looked at me in consternation. "LE Mart? What's wrong?"

"Too much killing."

"Two enemies is too much? Get out of camera view, then. Are we ready?"

"Go."

Meebrlee-Riit snarled, "Envoy, this had best be of great interest. We prepare for hyperdrive."

"Dominant One, the timing was not of my choosing," Fly-By-Night bellowed into the oversized face. "The human attacked while Packer was visiting the waterfall. I have killed the telepath's slave-"

"The Jotok is dead?"

Fly-By-Night cringed. "No, Dominant One, no! Only the man. The Jotok lives. Telepath lives."

"The man is nothing. Telepath did not purchase the man! Is Packer functional, and are you?"

"Packer is well. I have nosebleeds, lost lung function, lost hearing. The man had a projectile weapon, a toy, but he damaged my helmet. I managed to put the cabin under pressure. Packer keeps watch on Telepath. Shall I return the cabin to vacuum? One of us would have to remain in the waterfall."

"Set Packer at the controls. What can he ruin while there is nothing to fly? Maintain free fall. You and Packer trained for free fall, our prisoner did not. You, Envoy, talk to Telepath. Learn what he desires, what he fears." Cringe. "Dominant One, I shall."

Again we faced an electromagnetic cannon. I said, "Good. Really good." Space around me winked like an eye. I caught it happening and looked at the floor. Fly-By-Night looked up, and blinked at the distortion. "Mart, I don't think... Mart? I'm blind."

Paradoxical was in a knot, his arms covering all of his eyes. I said, "Maybe you'd better take Paradoxical into the waterfall and stay there." "Lost! Confused! Blind! How do you survive this?" the Jotok demanded. "How does any LE?"

"They'll close off the windows on *Stealthy-Mating*. I don't see how to do that in here. I guess they leave the boat empty if they can. Fly-By-Night, lower your head. Look at the floor. See the floor? Hold that pose."

"Stet."

I got under Paradoxical and he wrapped himself around me, sixty pounds of dryskinned octopus. I eased him onto Fly-By-Night's shoulders until he clung. "Gravity's on, right? Just crawl on around to the waterfall. Don't look up."

In hyperdrive something unmeasurable happens to electromagnetic phenomena, or else to organs that perceive them:

eyes, optic nerves, brains. A view of hyperspace is like being born sightless. The Blind Spot, we call it. In the waterfall room we straightened up and stretched. Fly-By-Night said, "None of us can fly-"

"No. We're passengers. Stowaways. Relax and let them do the flying." Paradoxical asked, "How can any mind guide a ship through this?"

I said, "There are species that can't tolerate it. Jotoki can't. Maybe puppeteers can't; most of them never leave their home system. Humans can use a mass pointer, a psionics device to find our way through hyperspace, as long as we don't look into the Blind Spot directly. But that's... well, part of a psionics device is the operator's mind. Computers don't see anything. Kzinti don't either. There are just a few freaky Kzinti who can steer through the Blind Spot directly."

"It is the Patriarch's blood line," Paradoxical said. "After the first War with Men, when Kzinti acquired hyperdrive, they learned that most cannot astrogate through hyperspace. Some few can. The Patriarch paid with names and worlds to add their sisters and daughters to his harem. Today the -Riits can fly hyperspace."

Fly-By-Night said, "Really?"

"It happened long after your folk were cut off. LE Graynor, I did research on more than just you. Of course you see the implications? Meebrlee-Riit must fly *Stealthy-Mating*. He will be under some strain, possibly at the edge of his sanity. Tech must see him in that embarrassing state. Envoy and Packer need not, and no prisoner should."

"He won't call?" I made it a question.

"He would not expect answer. Packer and Envoy would be hiding in the Waterfall," Paradoxical said.

That satisfied us. We were tired.

For three days we lived in the waterfall room.

One Kzin would have crowded the waterfall. With a man and a Jotok it was just that much more crowded. The smell of an angry Kzin made me jumpy. I couldn't sleep that way, so a high wind was kept blowing at all times.

We used the sand-patch in full view of each other. There were ribald comments. The Jotok was very neat. Fly-By-Night covered his

ding using gloved feet and expected me to do the same, but it wasn't needed. The magnetized "sand" churned and swallowed it to the recycler.

Somebody had to come out for food. It developed that nobody could do that but me.

Our talk ranged widely.

Fly-By-Night never told us how he had reached Fafnir, nor even how he had passed through Customs. He did tell us something about the two who had come with him on their name quests. "I left Nazi Killer still collecting computer games and I set out to buy a Jotok-"

"What kind of name is 'Nazi Killer'?"

"It's an illicit game. Our First Sires' children found it among exercise programs in *Angel's Pencil*. Nazi Killer is very good at it. On Shasht he bought improved games and modern computers and waldo gloves for Kzinti hands, thinking these would earn his name."

"Go on."

"Maybe he's already home. Maybe the Longest War caught him. He would not have survived that. As for me, I wasted time searching out medical techniques to heal my broken bones. Such practice has only evolved for Humans! Kzinti still keep their scars. Customs differ.

"But Grass Burner got what he wanted. Kittens!"

"Kittens?"

"Yes, six unrelated, a breeding set. On Sheathclaws there are only photos and holos of cats, and a library of tales of fantasy cats, and children who offer a Kzin kit a ball of yarn just because it makes their parents angry, nobody remembers why. Cats will get Grass Burner his name. But we remember Jotoks too. Paradoxical, if two species are smarter than one, three should be smarter yet. You will earn my name, if we can reach Sheathclaws."

I snapped out of a nightmare calling, "What was its name? *Stealthy-Mating*?" "We were asleep," Paradoxical complained. "We love sleeping in free fall. Back in the lake. But we wake and are still a self."

"Sorry." I almost remembered the dream. A lake of boiling blood, Kzinti patrolling the shores, wonderfully desirable human women in the shadows beyond. I was trying to swim. The pain was stunning,

but I was afraid to come out. Broken blood vessels were everywhere on my body. It hurt enough to ruin my sleep.

It was our fourth morning in hyperdrive.

"*Sraff-zisht*," said Paradoxical.

"Pleasemadam, seek interstellar spacecraft local to Fafnir, Kzinti crew, Heroes' Tongue name *Sraff-zisht*. Run it."

Fly-By-Night woke. He said, "Make a meat run, Mart."

When I went out for food, we detached the shower blanket so I could use it as a shield. Meebrlee-Riit had ordered us to keep the boat in free fall. No way could we be really sure he wouldn't call. I had to use handholds. I'd made a net for the food.

My computer dinged while we were eating. We listened:

Sraff-Zisht was known to the Shasht markets, and to Wunderland too. The ship carried red meat to Fafnir and lifted seafood. At Wunderland, the reverse. Crew turnover was high. They usually stayed awhile. This trip they'd lifted light and early.

"*Sraff-Zisht* is not armed," I said. I'd hoped it was true, but now I knew it. "Wunderland customs is careful. If they never found weapons or mounts for weapons, they're not there. We have the only gun!"

"Yes!" Fly-By-Night's fully extended claws could stop a man's heart without touching him.

"I've been thinking," I said. "There has to be a way to close that window strip. A Kzinti crew couldn't hide out in here! They'd tear each other to pieces!" "I knew that. It's too small," Fly-By-Night said. "I just didn't want to go out there. Must we?"

We three crawled out with the shower blanket over us, Paradoxical riding the Kzin's shoulders. We stayed under the blanket while we worked the controls. I felt like a child working my flatscreen under the covers after being sent to bed.

There was a physical switch under a little cage with a code lock. None of us had the code. The switch wasn't a self-destruct. We knew where that was. When we ran out of options I sliced the cage away with the *w'tsai*, and flipped the switch. From under the blanket we saw the shadows changing. I peeked out. Lost my vision, lost even my memory of vision... saw the edge of a shield crawling across the last edge of window.

If Meebrlee-Riit had called earlier, he would have seen us flying hyperspace with windows open. Some mistakes you don't pay for.

"I think you'd better spend a lot of time in disguise and out here," I told Fly-By-Night. I saw his look: better not push that. "The next few days should be safe, but we should practice getting a disguise on you. Meebrlee-Riit will call when he drops us out, and he will expect an answer, and he will not expect you to be still covered with blood and half hidden in ripped-up armor. Home is an eighteen- to twenty-day trip, they said. Ten to go, call it three in hyperspace."

The Kzin was tearing into a joint of something big. "Keep talking." "We need to paint you. Envoy had a smooth face, no markings except for what looked like black eyebrows swept way up."

"What would you use for paint?"

"The kitchens on some of the Nakamura Lines ships offered dyes for Easter eggs. Then again, they went bankrupt. What have we got? Let's check out the kitchen wall."

Choices aboard *Sraff-Zisht's* boat were sparse. One variety of handmeal. Paradoxical's green sludge. Twenty settings for meat... "Fly-By-Night, what are these?"

"Ersatz prey from Kzin, I expect. Not bad, just strange."

They weren't all meat. We had two flavors of blood, and a milky fluid. "Artificial milk with diet supplements," Fly-By-Night told us, "to treat injuries and disease. Adults wouldn't normally use it."

Three kinds of fluids. Hot blood- "Is one of these human?"

"I wouldn't know, and that's one damn rude question to ask someone you have to live with-"

"I'm sorry. What I-"

"-for the next nine to ten days. If I get through this they'll have to give me a name."

"I just want to know if it coagulates."

Silence. Then, "Intelligent question. I've been on edge, Mart."

I didn't say that Kzinti are born that way. "Ease up on the cappuccino." "We should thicken this. Mix it with something floury. Mush up a handmeal?" The handmeals would pull apart. We worked with the layers: a meatlike pâté, a vegetable pâté, something cheesy, shells of hard bread. The bread stayed too lumpy: no good. Cheese thickened the blood. One kind of blood did coagulate. We got a thick fluid that could be spread into a Kzin's fur, then would get thicker.

Milk lightened it enough, but then it stayed too liquid. More cheese? We covered Fly-By-Night in patches everywhere, except his face, which we didn't want to mess up yet. This latest batch looked good where we'd spread it on his belly. I gave him a crossed fingers sign and worked it into his face. Not bad.

We tried undiluted blood for the eyebrows. Too pale. Work on that later. I stood back and asked, "Paradoxical?"

"The marks weren't symmetrical," Paradoxical said. "You tend to want him to look too human. They're not eyebrows. Trail that right one almost straight up-" "You'd better do it."

He worked. Presently he asked, "Mart?"

"Good!"

That was all Fly-By-Night needed. He set us spinning as he jumped for the waterfall room. We gave him an hour to dry off, because the shower blanket didn't suck up all the water, and another to calm down. Then we started over. We couldn't get the eyebrows dark enough.

Finally we opened up a heating element in the kitchen wall, hoping we wouldn't ruin anything, and used it to char one of Envoy's ears. We used the carbon black to darken Fly-By-Night's "eyebrows." We bandaged one ear ("exploded by vacuum.") Then we made him wait, and talk.

"*Sraff-Zisht* drops back into Einstein space. There's an alarm. Do we get a few minutes? Does Meebrlee-Riit clean himself up before he shows himself? Does he want a nap?"

"I was not raised among the children of the Patriarch."

"He's dropped us out in the inner comets. That's a huge volume. He's not worried about any stray ship that happens along, but he might want to check on us. He still has to worry that the big bad telepath has murdered his crew. Fly-By-Night? Massacres are routine?"

"Duels, I think, and riots. Mart, the cleanup routines are very simple. Any surviving crew with a surviving fingertip could set them going." "Meebrlee-Riit calls. Right away?"

"He will set a course into Home system. Then he will make himself gorgeous. Let the lesser Kzinti wait. Count on forty minutes after we enter Einstein space." "Stet. He calls. Envoy's all cleaned up. Big bandage on his ear. What is Envoy's attitude?"

Fly-By-Night let his claws show. Kzinti do sweat, but we'd cooled the cabin. His makeup was holding. "Half mad from sensory deprivation, still he must cringe before his alpha officer. Repress rage. Meebrlee-Riit might enjoy that. Change orders just to shake up Envoy."

"Cringe," I said.

Fly-By-Night pulled himself lower in his chair. His ear flattened, his lips were tight together.

"Good. Envoy wouldn't eat in front of Meebrlee-Riit-?"

"No!"

"Our makeup wouldn't stand up to that."

"No, and I promise not to eat the makeup!"

We kept him talking. I wanted to see how long the makeup would last. I wanted to see if he'd go berserk. A little berserk wouldn't hurt, in a Kzin who had been trapped in sensory deprivation for many days, but he had to remember his lines. Three hours later... he didn't crack, but the makeup started to. We sent him off to get clean.

Morning of the ninth day. I couldn't stop chattering.

"We'll drop out of hyperspace at the edge of Home system. We almost know when. There is only one speed in hyperdrive-" though Quantum Two hyperdrive is hugely faster and belongs to another species. "If *Sraff-Zisht* has been traveling straight toward Home at three days to the light-year, we'll drop out in..." "Four hours and ten minutes," Paradoxical said.

"The jigger factor is, where does Meebrlee-Riit drop us out? Hyperdrive takes "flat" space. If there are masses around to distort space, the ship's gone. Pilots are very careful not to get too close to their target sun. Really cautious types aim past a target system. Just what kind of pilot is Meebrlee-Riit?"

"Your pronunciation is terrible," said Fly-By-Night.

"Yah?"

"Crazy Kzin. Dive straight in. Cut the hyperdrive ten ce'meters short of death. Let our intrinsic velocity carry us straight into the system. Mart, that is the only decent bet."

"Where is Packer? Still in the waterfall?"

"I will think of something."

"I want you in makeup two hours early."

"No."

"H-"

"Yes, he might drop out short! But he might circle! He might enter Home system at an angle. Our window of opportunity has to slop over on either side." Fly-By-Night's speech was turning mushy again, lips pulling far back, lots of gleaming white teeth. Even Envoy didn't look like that. Sheathclaws must have good dental hygiene.

"We know that he will not show himself to Envoy and Packer after nine days of letting the Blind Spot drive him crazy and ruin his hairdo. You'll have forty minutes to make me beautiful."

"Stet. What next? Decelerate for a week. Drop the boat somewhere, maybe in the asteroids, without changing course. The Home asteroid belt is fairly narrow. Still plenty of room to hide.

"They'll bring you aboard ship just before they drop the boat. Because you're dangerous. Thanks." He'd dialed me up a handmeal. "You're dangerous, so they'll keep you in free fall until the last minute. If we're wrong about that, we could get caught by surprise."

"Bring me aboard? How does that work? Order Envoy and Packer to stun me and pull me through the small lock? We can't do that. They're dead!"

"Lure the technology officer in here."

"How?"

"Don't know. Make up a story. Let's just get through dropout without getting caught."

* * *

A recording spoke. A computer whined, "Dominant Ones, we have returned to the universe. Be patient for star positions."

Paradoxical started the curtain retracting. Stars emerged. I went to the kitchen wall and dialed up what we needed.

The recording reeled off a location based on some easy-to-find stars and clusters. Paradoxical listened intently. "Home system," he said. "We will use the telescope to find better data. Can you do that alone?"

"Yah." We'd practiced. In free fall we were still a bit awkward, but I mixed the basic makeup, then added char to a smaller batch. A bit more? All? Ready. "You do the eyebrows, Doc."

"First I will finish this task."

Fly-By-Night held still while I rubbed the food mixture into his facial fur. Paradoxical said, "Graviton wake indicates a second ship."

"Damn!" Fly-By-Night snarled. I flung myself backward; my seat web caught me. Paradoxical said, "We find nothing in visible light."

"Don't move your mouth. Aw, Fly-By-Night!" He was in an all-out snarl, trying to talk and failing. Drool made a darker runnel. "If Meebrlee-Riit saw that he wouldn't care who you are. Lose the teeth!"

Fly-By-Night relaxed his mouth. "Your extra week is down the toilet, Mart. They're making pickup here and now."

The makeup had stayed liquid. "Paradoxical, give him eyebrows." I brushed out the drool, then settled myself out of camera range. They'd given me the flight controls. Paradoxical on astrogation, Fly-By-Night on weapons.

Paradoxical finished his makeup work and moved out of camera range, fifteen minutes ahead of schedule. I asked, "Shall we talk? Is this second ship just an escort?"

"No. Why make *Sraff-Zisht* conspicuous? Transfer the telepath, then move on to Home. This new ship runs to some outer world, or to Kzin itself-" Meebrlee-Riit popped up bigger than life and fourteen minutes early. He demanded, "Envoy, is the telepath well?"

Fly-By-Night flinched, then cringed. "The telepath is healthy, Dominant One. I judge that he is not in his right mind."

"The Jotok? Yourself? Where is Packer?"

"The Jotok amuses himself with a computer. I will welcome medical attention. Packer... Dominant One... Packer looked on hyperspace."

"He knew better!"

"Envoy" recoiled, then visibly pulled himself together. "Soon or late, Dominant One, every Hero looks. Wealth and a name and the infinite future, if he has sisters and daughters, if he can stay sane. Packer did not. He hides in the waterfall when I let him. Set him in a hunting park soon or he will die." "That will not be our task. *Leap For Life* will be here soon. Transfer the boat to *Leap For Life*. Haste! No need to take Telepath out of his vacuum refuge. You will be relieved aboard *Leap For Life*."

"Yes, Dominant One!"

"Packer must guard the telepath. The telepath will attack now if ever." "Yes-"

Meebrlee-Riit was gone.

"We have it!" Paradoxical projected what he was seeing against the cannon casing.

Still distant, backlit by Apollo, Home's sun, a sphere nestled in a glowing arc of gamma ray shield, its black skin broken by holes and projections and tiny windows. Dots-and-commas script glowed brilliant orange. "We find heavy graviton wake. That ship is decelerating hard."

"Built in this century," Fly-By-Night said.

Sraff-Zisht dropped us free.

This was not much of a puzzle. I spun the boat, aimed at *Leap For Life* and said, "Shoot."

My hair stirred. Fly-By-Night's fur stood up and rippled. He said, "Done. Doc?" "The graviton wake is gone. You burned out its thrusters."

I boosted us to put *Sraff-Zisht* between us and *Leap For Life*. *Leap For Life* had the weapons, after all. I set our gun on *Sraff-Zisht* and said, "Again." "Done. I burned out something."

"Graviton flare," Paradoxical said, just as *Sraff-Zisht* vanished. "Meebrlee-Riit must have tried to return to hyperspace," Fly-By-Night said. "We burned out the hyperdrive. But he still has thrusters!"

I rotated the boat to focus the gun on the immobilized *Leap For Life*. "Projectiles. Shoot it to bits."

Fly-By-Night punched something. We heard the weapon adjusting, but he didn't shoot. "Why?"

I screamed, "They've got all the weapons, our shield has flown away-" "Stet." The boat's lone weapon roared. It was right in the middle of the cabin/cargo hold. The noise was amazing. The boat recoiled: cabin gravity lurched to compensate. *Leap For Life* jittered and came apart in shreds. "-And they don't have the hostages! And now it's one less tanj thing to worry about."

"Stet, stet, I understand!"

Paradoxical said, "We win."

We looked at the Jotok. He said, "We may report all that has happened, now, via laser broadcast to Home. We fly the boat to Home with our proofs. The law of Home can arrange to retrieve *Odysseus*. With his hyperdrive burned out, Meebrlee-Riit is trapped in Home system. In the full glare of publicity he must follow the

Covenants. He may trade his hostages for some other consideration such as amnesty, but they must be returned. Stet?"

"He's still got my family! But I think we can turn on the cabin *futzy* gravity now, if you don't mind-" I stopped because Meebrlee-Riit, greatly magnified, was facing Fly-By-Night.

"Some such consideration," he mimicked us. "You look stupid, Telepath, covered with food. Only one consideration can capture my interest! Read my mind if you doubt me. Release my entourage and surrender! The hostages for yourself!" Fly-By-Night's claw moved. No result showed except for Meebrlee-Riit's widening eyes, but Fly-By-Night had given him a contracted view. He was seeing all of us. "Lies! You killed my Heroes? Eeeeerg!" A hair-lifting snarl as Fly-By-Night lifted Packer's ear into view.

It seemed the right moment. I showed Envoy's surviving ear. "We had to use the other."

"Martin Wallace Graynor, you may buy back your hostages and your life by putting the telepath into my hands!"

It began to seem that Meebrlee-Riit was mad. I asked, "Must I subdue him first?" A killing gape was my answer. I asked, "And where would you take him then, with no hyperdrive?"

"Not your concern."

"We're going to call for help now. Over the next few hours all of Home system is going to know you're here. A civilized solar system seethes with telescopes. If you have allies in the asteroids, you can't go to them. You'd only point them out to the Home Rule."

"What if you never make that broadcast, LE Graynor? And I can... thaw... sss." He'd had a notion. He stepped out of range. Ducked back and fisheyed the view to show his whole cabin. The other Kzin, Tech, was at his workstation, watching.

A wall slid away. Through an aperture ten yards wide I could see a much bigger cargo hold and all of *Odysseus'* cargo modules. Meebrlee-Riit moved to one of them, opened a small panel and worked.

Back he came. "I can reset the temperature on these machines. I thought you might wonder, but soon I will show you thawed fish. You cannot do to me what you did to *Leap For Life* without killing my hostages too. If you broadcast any message at all, I will set the

third module thawing, and then I will show you thawed dead hostages."

I was sweating.

The Kzin aristocrat said, "Telepath... Fly-By-Night. I will give you a better name. Your prowess has earned a name even as an enemy. What is it we ask of you? Take a harem. Raise your sons. See your daughters grow up in the Patriarch's household. A life in luxury buys survival for sixty-four Human citizens. "Think, then. I can wait. A boat's life support is not the match for an interstellar spacecraft. Or else-"

The mass of an interstellar spacecraft jumped into our faces. Meebrlee-Riit was tiny in its window, huge in the hologram stage. He threw his head back, a prolonged screech, mouth gaping as wide as my head. Forced his mouth to close so he could ask, "Graynor, have you ever flown a spacecraft? Do you think you have the skill to keep me from ramming you?"

I said, "Yes. Space is roomy, and the telepath is our hostage. Doc, can you give me a deep-radar view of yon privateer?"

Paradoxical guessed what I meant. The mass outside our dome went transparent. I looked it over. Fuel... more fuel... a bulky hyperdrive design from the last century. Gravity and reaction motors were also big and bulky. Skimpy cargo space, smaller cabin, and that tiny box shape must be a waterfall room just like ours.

I spun the boat. "You say I can't shoot?"

Meebrlee-Riit looked up. He must have been looking right into our gun. "Pitiful! Are all Humans natural liars?"

Fine-tuning my aim, I said, "There is a thing you should know about us. If you eat prey that is infested... *whasht-meery*... you may be very sick, but it doesn't kill off your whole blood line. Shoot," I said to Fly-By-Night.

The gun roared. Meebrlee-Riit's image whirled around. The boat recoiled: gravity imbalances swirled through my belly. In our deep-radar view the waterfall room became a smudge.

Then *Sraff-Zisht* was gone.

"We track him," Paradoxical said. "Gravitons, heavily accelerating, there." A green circle on the sky marked nothing but stars, but I spun the boat to put cross hairs on it. "Electromagnetic," I shouted.

"Am I a fool?" The gun grumbled, shifting from projectile mode.

"Graviton wake has stopped."

Fly-By-Night cried, "I have not fired!"

I said, "He's got no hyperdrive—"

Paradoxical said, "Gravitons again. He will ram."

The room wobbled, my hair stood on end, Fly-By-Night fluffed out into a great orange puffball. "Graviton wake is gone," Paradoxical said.

I moved us, thirty gee lateral, in case his aim was good.

Sraff-Zisht, falling free, shot past us by two miles. I chased it down. Whim made me zip in alongside the ship's main window. Grinning like a Kzin, I screamed, "Now wait us out!"

In the hologram stage Meebrlee-Riit hugged a stack of meteor patches while he pulled on the waterfall door. Vacuum inside would be holding the door shut. We could see Tech working his way into a pressure suit, but Meebrlee-Riit hadn't thought of that yet. He turned to look at the camera, at us.

He cringed. Down on his belly, face against the floor.

Paradoxical set our com laser on Home. The lightspeed lag was several hours, so I just recorded a help call and sent it. Then, as we'd have to anyway, we three began recording the whole story. That too would arrive before we could—Tech stood above Meebrlee-Riit, watching us. When Fly-By-Night looked at him he cringed, a formal crouch. "Dominant One, what must we do?"

Fly-By-Night said, "Tend your cargo until you can be towed to Home. Meebrlee-Riit also I place in your charge. Set your screamer and riding lights so you can be found. You may dream of betrayal but do not act on it. You know what I am. I know who you are. Your hostages' lives will buy back your blood line." He'd said he couldn't read minds. I still think he was bluffing.

A century ago the new settlers had towed a moonlet from elsewhere into geosynchronous orbit around Home. Home Base was where incoming ships arrived, and where they thawed incoming Ice Class passengers.

The law had business with hijackers and kidnapers; we were their witnesses. We were the system's ongoing news item. Media and the law were waiting. I rapidly judged that anchorpersons and lawyers were my fate. The only way to hide myself was to sign with

Home Information Megacorp and talk my head off until my public grew bored.

If Carlos Wu tried to call me they'd be all over him too. I hoped he'd wait it out.

Sraff-Zisht we had left falling free through Home system. Home Rule had to round up ships to bring it back. It took two of their own, four Belters acting for the bounty, and one shared by a media consortium, all added to the several they sent after *Odysseus*. It took them ten days to fetch *Sraff-Zisht*.

For eight days I was questioned by Home and ARM law and by LE Wilyama Warbelow, the anchor from Home Information Megacorp. Wilyama was wired for multisensory recording. What she experienced became immortal.

They'd wanted to do that to me too.

The last two days were a lull: I was able to more or less relax, and even see a bit of the captured asteroid. Then *Sraff-Zisht* descended on tethers to Home Base, and everybody wanted Mart Graynor.

The Covenant against sensory deprivation as torture has long since been interpreted as the right to immediate trial, not just for Kzinti but throughout human space, a right not to be evaded. I was to submit to questioning by Meebrlee-Riit and Tech, by their lawyer and everyone else's, while two hundred Ice Class passengers were being thawed elsewhere.

I screamed my head off. Cameras were on me. The law bent. When they thawed the hostages from *Sraff-Zisht*, I was there to watch.

My wife and child weren't there.

And we all trooped off to use the holo wall in the Outbound Enterprises Boardroom.

The prisoners watched us from an unknown site. It didn't seem likely they'd burst through the holo wall and rip us apart. Meebrlee-Riit's eyes glittered. Tech only watched.

The court had restricted the factions to one advocate each. All I had for company were Sirhan, a police commissioner from Home Rule; Judge Anita Dee; Handel, an ARM lawyer; Barrister, a runty Kzin assigned as advocate to the prisoners; a hugely impressive peach-colored Kzin, Rasht-Myowr, representing the Patriarch; and anchorperson Wilyama Warbelow.

Judge Dee told the prisoners, "You are each and together accused of violations of local law in two systems, and of the Covenants of 2505 at Fafnir. A jury will observe and decide your fate."

LE Barrister spoke quickly. "You may not be compelled to speak nor to answer questions, and I advise against it. I am to speak for you. Your trial will take at least two days, as we must wait for other witnesses, but no more than four." Meebrlee-Riit spoke in Interworld. "We have followed the Covenants. Where are my accusers?"

They all looked at me. I said, "Gone."

"Gone?"

"Fly-By-Night and Paradoxical and I signed an exclusive contract with Home Information Megacorp for our stories. I got a room here at Home Base. They'll thaw my family here, after all." If they lived. "We gave LE Warbelow," I nodded; the anchor bowed, "an hour's interview, presumed to be the first of many. Fly-By-Night and Paradoxical transferred to a shuttle. The Patriarch's representative missed them by just under two hours. They disappeared on the way down."

I've never doubted their destination. Fly-By-Night had come to Home for a reason, and he never told anyone who had arranged their transport to Fafnir. The law raised hell, as if it were my fault they were gone. Warbelow was more sensible. She paid for my room, a major expense that wasn't in our contract. With the aliens gone, I had become the only game in town.

They got their money's worth. Mart Graynor emerged as a braggart with a Fafnir accent I'd practiced for two years. I played the same tune while various lawyers and law programs questioned me. I hoped nobody would see a resemblance to documentaries once made by Beowulf Shaeffer.

Barrister reacted theatrically. "Gone! Then who is witness against my clients?" "We have LE Graynor, Your Honor," Sirhan said, speaking for Home Rule, "and the crew and passengers of *Odysseus* will be called. *Odysseus* had to be chased down in the Kuiper belt, the inner comets, and towed in. They'll be arriving tomorrow. Any of the passengers might press claims against the defendants." The judge said, "LE Handel?"

The ARM rep said, "The Longest War threatens all of human space. We need what these Kzinti can tell us. They've violated the

Covenants. There was clear intent to store humans as reserves of meat-

"This was a local act against Homer citizens!" Sirhan said.

Judge Dee gestured at the big peach-colored Kzin, who said, "The Patriarch's claim is that Meebrlee-Riit is no relative of his and has no claim to his name. I am to take possession-"

Meebrlee-Riit leapt at us, bounced back from the wall-or from a projection screen-and screamed something prolonged. "I flew outside the universe!" said my translator. "Who can do that? Only the -Riit! In cowardice does the Patriarch disclaim my part in the Long War!" He changed to Interworld: "LE Graynor knows! Nine days through hyperspace, accurately to my rendezvous!"

"I am to take possession and return him for trial, and his Heroes too. I must have Envoy's ear, Graynor, unless you can establish a kill. Nameless One, Kzinti elsewhere can fly hyperspace. Females of your line may have reached the -Riit harem. What of it?"

"My line descends from the Patriarch! I violated no Covenants!"

The runty Kzin who was his advocate caught the judge's eye. He too spoke Interworld. "To properly represent the prisoners I must speak with them alone and encrypted to learn their wishes. I expect we will fight extradition. Rasht-Myowr," a prolonged howl in the Heroes' Tongue. The Patriarch's designate was trying to loom over him. My translator buzzed static. The runty Kzin waited, staring him down, until the big one stepped back and sheathed his claws. Barrister said, "Violation of the Covenants would hold my clients here in any case, but none of these claims has any force until we can interview the victims. *Odysseus'* crew and passengers will reach Home Base tomorrow. We have only LE Graynor's word for any of this."

"He's telling the truth, though," I said.

Meebrlee-Riit barked his triumph. The ARM man said, "*Futz*, Graynor!" Judge Dee asked, "LE Graynor, are you familiar with the Covenants of 2505?" "As much as any law program. I've examined them half to death."

"Did you see violations?"

"No. I thought I had. I thought Packer must have shot out *Odysseus'* hyperdrive and hyperwave, putting *Odysseus* at unacceptable risk, but it's clear he didn't. Hyperdrive got *Odysseus*

into the Home comets, and they called ahead via hyperwave as soon as they were out of the Nursery Nebula."

Rasht-Myowr's tail slashed across and back. "Your other claims fail! The false lord is mine, and his remaining Hero too!"

I said, "Whatever these two learned about Fly-By-Night and his companions, taking them back to Kzin for trial gives that to the Patriarch. On that basis I'd keep them, if I was an ARM."

"But you're testifying," the ARM said bitterly, "that they didn't violate the Covenants."

"Yah."

"Mine! And Envoy's ear," Rasht-Myowr said. "His one ear. Did you kill him?" "I killed them both. Do you need details? Fly-By-Night was trapped in his vac refuge. We'd just rounded Turnpoint Star and Envoy was flying the ship. Difficult work, took his full attention. Back turned, free fall, crash web holding him in his chair. I had Fly-By-Night's *w'tsai*." The police had already confiscated that. "He would have killed me if he'd released his crash web in time."

"He would have killed you anyway! Why would you keep only one ear?" For an instant I couldn't speak at all. Then I barely remembered my accent. "I h-heated one for charcoal to paint Fly-By-Night. Packer was wrestling Fly-By-Night when I chopped him up, so Fly-By-Night got the ear. He chewed off the other one. They stole, you stole my wife and child and unborn, my harem, you *whasht-meery* son of a stray cat! I still haven't seen them alive. I memorized those *whasht-meery* Covenants. They only forbid my killing your relatives!" "Duel me then!" Meebrlee-Riit shouted. "Back turned, crash web locked, free fall, my claws only, blunt them if you like-"

"Barrister, you will silence your client or I will," the judge said. "-And you armed! Prove you can do this!"

Meebrlee-Riit, I decided, was trying to commit suicide. He didn't want to go with Rasht-Myowr. Let the Patriarch have him, I owed him nothing. Almost nothing.

I said, "Judge Dee, if you'll let me ask a few questions, I may solve some problems here."

"You came to be questioned, LE Graynor. What did you have in mind?" "Rasht-Myowr, if a violation of the Covenants can't be proved, then I take it these prisoners are yours-"

Judge Dee interposed. "They may be assessed for substantial property violations, Graynor. Rescue costs. A passenger ship turned to junk!"

"I will pay the costs," Rasht-Myowr said.

I asked, "You'll take them back to your Patriarch?"

"Yah."

"They'll be tried publicly, of course."

The peach-colored Kzin considered, then said, "Of course."

"The court will have a telepath to question him? They always do."

"Rrr. Your point?"

"Would you let a telepath find out what Meebrlee-Riit saw of the telepaths of Sheathclaws? And learn how they live? Really?"

He didn't get it. I said, "Three hundred years living alongside Humans. Sharing their culture. Their schooling programs. Instead of theft and killing, hang gliding! Meebrlee-Riit, tell him about Fly-By-Night."

The prisoner looked at the Patriarch's voice. He said, "I crawled on my belly for him."

Rasht-Myowr yowled. "With the -Riit name on you? How dare you?"

"I meant it."

"Meant—?"

"Do you think I was born with no pride, to take and defend a name like mine? I found I could fly the Outsider hyperdrive! I knew that I must be a -Riit. Then fortune favored me again. A telepath lost on Shasht, healthy and arrogant, the genetic line that will give us the Longest War!

"Even after questioning, crippled, Nazi Killer tore up one of my unwary Heroes so that we had to leave him. He knew things about me... but Nazi Killer was no threat. Frustrating that we had to kill him, but he'd told us how to retrieve another. It was Fly-By-Night and his slaves who stripped me of everything I am! He killed my Heroes. He became Envoy! Reduced my ship to a falling prison." Rasht-Myowr demanded, "Technical Officer, is your alpha officer mad?" Tech spoke simply; his dignity was still with him. "I followed the telepath's commands exactly. What he had done to us, to him I

followed, how could I face him? With what weapons? But Fly-By-Night was not alone. Kzin and 'man and Jotok, they took our ears."

I hoped then that there were unseen defenses, that nobody would have set fragile humans undefended among these Kzinti. Rasht-Myowr turned on me a gaping grin that would not let him speak. His alien stench was not that of any creature of Earth, but I knew it was his rage.

"You can't take them back to the Patriarchy," I said to Rasht-Myowr. Because they had kept faith.

* * *

Quickpony and the Van Zild children were with me when Outbound Enterprises thawed two modules of passengers taken from *Odysseus*. The way they were wrapped, I couldn't tell who was who until Jeena was wheeled out of the cooker. We clung to each other and waited. If Jeena was alive, so was her mother. We waited, ice in our veins, and she came.