

SLIPSHOD, AT THE EDGE OF THE UNIVERSE

ON SLIPSHOD, THE LARGEST of the asteroids at our edge of the universe, we set up a temporary camp. I guess "we" is inappropriate since I, as their prisoner, had nothing to do with the operation. With no atmosphere on Slipshod (the name given the asteroid by our exec officer, Elaine), we had to stay within the transparent dome. Actually, I did not have to stay within the dome. I could slip out and drift over the asteroid's surface. I had no need of atmosphere and was, by human definition, noncorporeal. Yet I could not waste energy reserves by going far. I had a substantial amount of reserve, but did not want to waste any in case a chance for a real escape came. And Slipshod was so plain and monotonous that scenic tours were out of the question.

Elaine traced her fingers along the surface of one of the screens in the computer where I was, by human definition, caged. As her fingers lingered on the screen, I sipped at her energy. At that moment I needed none of the human energy, but I could never resist absorbing some of it from this woman who was regarded as so beautiful among the others. In my own sense of beauty, she is beautiful for the energy I absorb from her, an energy that, as it dissipates through my system, gives me a feeling like no other, like no other species I have absorbed from. Humans had the best reserves of energy I had ever experienced, and the most flavorful as well. And Elaine's was the energy I most craved. Truly, it was superior to the energy received from any of my own kind whom I have loved or killed in the elongated span of my existence.

Days ago, according to their measure of time, Elaine and Casey, the ship commander, discussed the mission just after making love in her quarters. During their peculiar expressions of passion, the heel of Elaine's foot had pressed briefly, and hard, against the screen of her room's computer terminal and, as a result, I was riding on a surge of energy that sent me bouncing from circuit to diode to cable and back again. At the time I paid little attention to what the two were saying, although like everything else I ever heard I remembered it later.

"I have serious misgivings," Casey said, his words coming out of his mouth in odd groupings, nothing like the rhythm of speech he normally employed.

"About what?" Elaine asked, as she rubbed his chest. Casey was muscular, according to the impressions of others that I picked up when I absorbed from the humans aboard the ship. (Muscularity, and for that matter, all corporeality drew my interest easily as a field of study.) The others regarded his face, however, as something less than beautiful, as they judged beauty. Elaine of course was the standard. She was beautiful, even with her face marred by its continual unhappiness, and Casey was not.

For a long while Casey lay with his eyes shut and steadied his breathing.

"Misgivings," Elaine prompted.

"Yes. About our goals. Our mission objective. The dark at the end of the tunnel."

"You're posing again."

"I have gotten through life this way. Don't stop me now. What I mean, Elaine, is that I always wanted my life to mean something."

"It does. You're a commander."

"Hollow triumph. I'm a commander who has never fought a major battle, never made an impact on political structures, never discovered anything significant during years of exploring the backwater regions of the universe."

I could understand Casey because of the rare absorptions I had drawn from him, but I tended to avoid his energy unless I was in a low-level state.

Elaine again accused him of posing and for a short while he became more direct.

"This mission is a punishment. No, not a punishment -- that would imply someone out to get me. I am not that important. No one is out to get me. I am just someone in the command structure, and a lower-echelon commander at that, who can be given a futile mission because there is nothing important for him to do anyway. What are we doing, when you come right down to it? Someone a thousand light-years away has theorized the location of the edge of the universe and so, as outsiders and therefore expendable, we are sent to the nearest point that the theory says it might be. If there is no edge to the universe, then the universe is infinite, as we have always comfortably believed, and we can go on forever looking for it. Talk about being shunted aside."

