

The Fulcrum

GWYNETH JONES

From Gardner Dozois - The Year's Best Science Fiction 23rd Annual Collection (2006)

*One of the most acclaimed British writers of her generation, Gwyneth Jones was a cowinner of the James Tiptree Jr. Memorial Award for work exploring genre issues in science fiction, with her 1991 novel *White Queen*, and has also won the Arthur C. Clarke Award, with her novel *Bold As Love*, as well as receiving two World Fantasy Awards—for her story "The Grass Princess" and her collection *Seven Tales and a Fable*. Her other books include the novels *North Wind*, *Flowerdust*, *Escape Plans*, *Divine Endurance*, *Phoenix Cafe*, *Castles Made of Sand*, *Stone Free*, *Midnight Lamp*, *Kairos*, *Life, Water in the Air*, *The Influence of Ironwood*, *The Exchange*, *Dear Hill*, and *The Hidden Ones*, as well as more than sixteen Young Adult novels published under the name Ann Halam. Her too-infrequent short fiction has appeared in *Interzone*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Off Limits*, and in other magazines and anthologies, and has been collected in *Identifying the Object: A Collection of Short Stories*, as well as *Seven Tales and a Fable*. She is also the author of the critical study *Deconstructing the Starships: Science Fiction and Reality*. Her stories have appeared in the *Fourteenth*, *Fifteenth*, and *Sixteenth Annual Collections*. She lives in Brighton, England, with her husband, her son, and a Burmese cat.*

Archimedes once said, "Give me the place to stand, and a lever long enough, and I will move the Earth." In the story that follows, such a lever is provided—and proves to be able to move more worlds than one...

*In the constellation of Orion, and illuminated by the brilliant star N380 Orionis, you will find the reflection nebula NGC 1999, and the "homo sapiens" Bok Globule, famous in astronomical history. This star nursery is the apparent location of the *Buonarotti* region, to which the 4-space equations give the shape of a notional cross with two-pointed expanding wings, known to *Deep Spacers* and other romantics as *The Fulcrum*. To some, this "X marks the spot" is the forbidden gate to *Eldorado*; to others, it's the source of our consciousness and an oracle of our future, set like *Delphi* at the navel of space-time...*

The aliens came back to their cabin to find that they'd been turned over again. Last time, they'd lost their drugs. This time it was the bikes. They sat in the wreckage of scattered belongings, letting the spume of violent and futile emotion shed from them, and feeling scared. Losing the fish-oil stash had been serious, but extreme tourists have to accept that they are rich and they will get ripped off. This was different. No one else on the station had any possible use for the exercise bikes. Their fellow prospectors were almost exclusively *Deep Space* veterans. A few hours a day of simulated mountain racing wouldn't touch their problem with the gravity well.

In the end, the company of their violated possessions got them down, so they decided to go and see Eddie the Supercargo. They knew he wouldn't do anything, but it's always better to report racial harassment. They put their coats on and bounced gently along the drab corridors—two humanoid aliens, about two meters tall, pale skinned and diffident, each with a crest of stiff red hair. Although they were a heterosexual couple, to human eyes they were as identical as identical twins—but unlike human identical twins, they didn't mind being mistaken for each other. They didn't meet anyone. The *Kuiper Belt* station did not aspire to the parkland illusions or shopping opportunities of near-Earth orbital hotels. Unless they were preparing for transit, most of the prospectors never left their cabins except to visit the saloon.

There were plans that the Panhandle would become the hub of a Deep Space International City, hence all the empty space in the Pan. For the moment it was simply an asymmetric ceramic fiber dumbbell, spinning in a minimal collision orbit-area of the asteroid reach—the Pan full of prospectors and their support staff, the Knob reserved for the government's business out here, and the Handle an empty, concertina-walled permanent umbilical between. The AIs took care of everything serious. The only actual human authority on board was Eddie. His duties were not onerous. As far as Orlando and Grace could make out, he did nothing when on shift except sit in his office at the Knob end of the Handle and play Freecell. On his off shift he would come down to the saloon and schmooze with assorted ruffians. His squeeze-suit and official rank branded him as a dilettante, but he adored the Deep Spacers.

Eddie's gaff was a step or two up from the standard cabins. It had a double skin to keep the cold at bay, and the chairs, desk and cabinets swelling from the walls and floor were designer styled, in a drab, corporate sort of way. There were no personal touches and no visible equipment (besides Eddie), except the desktop screen that he used for his endless solitaire. The Supercargo was a skinny fellow, with wispy dark hair that floated around his shoulders, sad eyes and a taste for extravagant dress. Today he was wearing knee-high platform boots crusted in silver glitter. The bone-preserving pressure suit was concealed by a spiderweb gold silk shirt and black neoprene biker trousers; a copper and silver filigree scarf swayed airily about his throat. The prisoners of knocked-down gravity favored drifty accessories; it was a kind of gallows-humor; and Eddie was a shameless wannabe.

He greeted the aliens with enthusiasm, but he didn't like their complaint.

"Listen," he cut them off, at last, "I'm sorry you lost your bikes, but you know the rules. *There are no rules.* Anything you want, you take. That's the way we live, and you got to breeze it. You can't go all holier-than-thou out here in the Deep."

"We understand *that*" said Orlando, rolling his eyes.

"We'd be *fine* with that," drawled Grace, with a shrug, "if those deadbeats had anything that we *wanted* to steal. It's just unfair that it's all one way."

Eddie beamed, relieved that they hadn't been expecting a police action, and the visit became social. The truth was, passionately as he admired the Deep Spacers, Eddie was frightened of them, and the fact that (theoretically) he could sling them in irons or chuck them off the Panhandle made no difference. It's personality that counts in these back-of-beyond situations. The aliens understood this perfectly: They were pretty much in the same boat. Extreme tourists are always trying to look as if they belong, in situations where only insanely hard-ass nutcases have any real business.

"You know," Eddie confided, "the last Supercargo was knifed in the saloon, over a menu choice. You shouldn't take it personally; the guys are just a wild bunch — "

They knew the story. They thought it was unlikely and that the prospectors only knifed each other. But they sympathized with Eddie's need to romanticize a shit job: a career in space-exploration that had obviously hit the dregs.

"Thanks," said Grace. "Now we feel much better."

Eddie broke out alcohol bulbs and chocolate from his waistbelt, and the three of them chatted, talking guiltily about the blue planet far away, the overcrowded and annoying dump to which they would soon return—Eddie at the end of his tour, and Grace and Orlando on the next Slingshot—which was to the forgotten heroes of the Deep Space saloon an unattainable paradise. Suddenly the Supercargo went quiet, attending to a summons imperceptible to his visitors. They sat politely, while he stared into the middle distance, wondering if he was receiving an update from the AI machines, or maybe a command

from faraway Houston.

"Ooops," he said. "Duty calls. It's time for the alien to be milked."

"You mean the *other* alien," Grace corrected him.

Eddie shook his head, making his hair and his delicate scarf flip about like exotic seaweed in a tank. "Hahaha. C'mon, you two aren't really aliens."

Eddie gave slavish credence to whatever loony resumes the Deep Spacers cared to invent. Wormhole trips? Sentient rocks, diamonds the size of Texas, wow, he lapped it up... Orlando and Grace declared their elective cultural identity, which was perfectly acceptable at home, and they were jeered at.

"It's a state of mind," said Orlando.

"Hey," said Eddie shyly. "D'you want to come along? It's against the regs, but I trust you, and you did lose your bikes and all. It'll be okay. You won't get fried."

He stood up, teetering a little because the glitter boots were weighted, and concentrated on stowing his treatpack back on his belt. Grace and Orlando exchanged one swift glance. They knew exactly the terrifying thing that they were going to do.

Eddie did not use keycards, he did not visibly step up to a mark or get bathed in any identifying fields. He simply went up to the blank wall at the end of the umbilical. It opened, and he stood in the gap to let the aliens by. They were through the unbreachable Wall and inside the Knob, a Deep Space Fort Knox, the strongbox which held, according to rumor, the most fabulous treasure in the known universe.

"The Knob recognizes you?" said Orlando, suitably impressed. "Or do you have a key or an implant on you, that it recognizes?"

"Nah, it's me. I've got an implant—"

"Yeah. We noticed."

"That's a requirement of the job. But it's my informational profile that's written into the Knob, just for my tour of duty. Bios wouldn't be secure enough."

They were in a miniversion of the Pan, following a spiral corridor divided by greenish, ceramic fiber bulkheads. They noticed at once how clear the air was, free of the dust, shed cells and general effluvia of many human bodies. It was warmer too, and it didn't smell bad. The walls opened for Eddie, he stood and let his companions through like a wise cat inviting guests through the magnetized catnap; the walls closed up behind with spooky finality.

"Is there always air, heat and gravity at this end?" wondered Grace, offhand.

"Always," said Eddie. "Not for the thing, I don't think it uses air. I don't think it *breathes*. It'd be more expensive turning the life support on and off, that's all. The rad protection is shit," he added, "except in my actual cabin. The AIs are shielded, they don't need it. But half an hour won't fry your nuts."

"What about you?"

Eddie shrugged. "I've got my cabin, and hey, I've finished my family."

The aliens' wiry red hair stood up on end. They felt that, briefly, the Kuiper Belt station was not rotating aimlessly in place but steaming full ahead. They were sailing *outwards* (the only direction that there is)

across the Spanish Main, around Cape Horn, with Franklin to the North West Passage... Finally Eddie ushered them into a little room with the same fungoid fittings as his office: desk, chairs, screen and touchpad. One wall was a window, apparently looking into the cabin next door.

"There you go," said the Supercargo, shivering. "Now you can say you've seen it. Oh, no pictures, please. You don't want to get me into trouble."

"We wouldn't dream of it."

Eddie teetered, patting at his wayward hair. The aliens stood like zoo visitors, looking into a naked and featureless cell where something huddled on the floor: a dark, fibrous, purplish lump like a hundred-pound hunk of horsemeat. It was fuzzy in outline, as if not securely fixed in these particular dimensions, and had four blunt extrusions. A convoluted sheet of paler tissue covered some of the main lump, like a skein of fat over a slab of steak.

"Is it really right next door?" asked Grace, casually.

"I suppose," said Eddie. "I never thought about it." His eyes went unfocused as he checked the Knob's internal architecture, and he nodded. "Yeah, actually it is. Shit, I never knew that—" He was shivering more strongly.

"It looks as if its been skinned alive, filleted, and had its arms and legs cut off," breathed Orlando.

"And that could be its brain," whispered Grace. "It looks kind of like a cerebral cortex, unfolded out of someone's skull."

"I don't know why you're whispering," said Eddie. He'd started to pace up and down, flexing his long, delicate hands, as if in nervous impatience. "It can't hear you. Hey, you don't know what they're meant to look like. You're anthropomorphizing. It could be a handsome, happy whatsit, for all you know."

"We don't anthropomorphize," objected Grace. "We're aliens."

Eddie groaned a little. "Oh, have it your own way, a different word. You're thinking like it's a person. It isn't."

There's something in every human heart that delights in horrors: Orlando and Grace were not immune. They pored over the creature on the other side of the window, fascinated and seduced. They knew that Eddie was lying for his own comfort. Almost without a doubt, the thing had once been human. Whatever lies the government told, this goose that laid the golden eggs was almost certainly someone who had made a transit, and failed to return intact... But from where had it fallen, into this pit? *From where?* Where had it been, the lone voyager to that land of plenty?

"I can't believe they really keep it *here*," muttered Orlando. "I thought that was just Spacer bullshit."

"Where else?" inquired Eddie, sarcastically. "In the Pentagon basement? Give me a break. It's incre-credibly weird and unbelievably d-dangerous."

Now the creature was moving. It had begun to shudder and squirm across the floor of the cell, silently giving every sign of anguish and terror. "That's milking-time behavior," hissed Eddie. "Now you'll see something, watch, this is it—" But he seemed distracted. A flush had gathered around his eyes and nose, he was smiling strangely and breathing hard.

A section of the cell wall slid aside, revealing a recess set with a pair of waldo rings. Then the government arrived, in the form of two heavy-built robotic hands that reached into the chamber. The alien's

movement was now clearly an attempt to reach those hands. As soon as it was close, one of the big chunky mitts got a lock on a stubby tentacle, while the other, grotesquely, delved and disappeared into a cleft that had opened in the dark raw flesh. The creature jerked and writhed in pain, shuddering in that rough grip with an awful, sexual-seeming submission. The buried hand reappeared, full of something that squeezed between the fingers like a thick silvery goo, like liquid mercury. The robot arm retracted out of the cell and returned empty to delve again. Orlando and Grace watched this process happen five times, five greedy fistfuls (with Eddie's breath coming in gasps beside them). Then the robot hands vanished, and the cell wall closed up again.

"Wow, that was *gross*," said Orlando. "Thanks a million, Eddie."

"But it wants to be milked," whispered Eddie, still off on his own track. "It *wants* that to happen. Like the scorpion. It has to obey its nature."

"Was that q-bits?" asked Grace, trying to sound unmoved. "Or the helium?"

"Yeah," said Eddie, blinking and mopping his brow with the filigree scarf. "They get helium, it's half the earth's supply now. An' decoherence resistant particles for building q-bits. It saves pollution, little children get clean water, whoo — "

He pulled himself together. "Shit, I don't know. The goop goes straight back to Earth, all automated. I only work here. C'mon. Got to take you back."

The journey out was the same as the journey in, except that Eddie's mood had taken a severe downturn. The aliens were silent too. He parted from them at his office door. "Catch you later," he said, as he slunk into privacy.

They didn't fancy their turned-over cabin, so they made for the saloon.

It was late afternoon by standard time, and the dank, icy bar was quiet, empty except for the hardcore of alcoholics and gamblers who lurked here from happy hour to happy hour. A couple of the support staff were beating up a recalcitrant food machine. The morbidly obese lady in the powerchair, who wore her hair side-parted in a fall of golden waves, was acting as banker at one of the autotables. (The aliens, who were crazy about Hollywood, knew her as Lakey.) The tall, gangly bloke with the visor—whom they called Blind Pew—looked up to stare, from the band of gleaming darkness where his eyes had been. He said, "Twist," and returned his attention to the game. The aliens got beer tubes and installed themselves at a table near the games consoles—which nobody played, because they required Earth currency credit, and the Deep Spacers didn't have that kind of money.

"Wooueee," breathed Orlando, finally. "Whaaat?"

"My God!"

"Now I understand why they insist it's an alien."

"The gateway to Eldorado," babbled Grace. "My god, I thought they... why don't they... You'd think they'd be doing *something* — "

"You mean, why isn't the International Government investigating the thing? Because they daren't, Grace. They're junkies. They're totally dependent. They daren't do anything that might stop the flow."

In the close to four hundred years since spaceflight got started, the human race had never got beyond orbital tourism, government science stations and wretched, hand-to-mouth mining operations in the Belt. The discovery of nonlocal travel had made a huge difference; but the catch was that so far only a

conscious human being could make a Buonarotti transit. You could take what you could carry, as long as it didn't contain a processor, and that was all. Hence the Lottery, which had been set up out here, as far from Earth as possible in case of unforeseen space-time disasters. The government was handing out cheap survey stakes in the galactic arm to anyone prepared to come to the Kuiper Belt. You got the rights to a portfolio of data (there were programs that would advise you how to make up your package) and the *chance* that your claim would turn up the spectral signature of an Earthtype, good atmosphere, viable planet—the 4-space coordinates of paydirt.

Then you had to check it out: lie down in a Buonarotti couch in the transit lounge, with your little outfit of grave-goods, and go you knew not where.

Prospectors went missing for months; prospectors came back dead, or mutilated, or deathly sick. Just often enough some Spacer came back safe, the proud owner of a prime development site: rich enough, even after selling it at a considerable discount, to pay the medical bills and go home to Earth in fabulous style. But once, *once*, back in the early days, someone or something had materialized in the transit lounge bearing not merely information, but *treasure*...

Orlando and Grace had come out on the superfast advanced-fusion Slingshot, which made the journey in nine months these days, if the orbital configuration was right. (The harvest from the thing in the Knob traveled faster; it didn't need life-support and could stand a lot more gs.) They'd known they'd be stuck for a year, whether their numbers came up or not, and then face another six months for the homeward trip. They'd known the Lottery was meant for redundant Deep Spacers — kind of a scattergun pension fund for the human debris of the conventional space age. But they had seen a window of bold, dazzling opportunity and decided it was worth the risk.

They'd thought it out. They'd taken a government loan-grant, they'd brought their vitamins, and paid the exorbitant supplement for the freight of the bikes. (They'd done the research, they knew that squeeze-suits were just prosthetic, and you had to do real exercise to save your skeleton.) They weren't crazy. They'd had no intention of risking an actual transit themselves. The plan had been that they would get some good coordinates and sell them to a development consortium (you were allowed to do that, and there were plenty, hovering like vultures). The consortium could hire a Deep Spacer for the perilous test-trip, and Orlando and Grace would still be taking home a very nice slice. But they'd been on the Kuiper Belt for nine months, watching the survey screens, and their stake had been coming up stone-empty. Nothing but gas giants, hot rocks, cold rocks. The loss of the bikes had been the last straw. Just a couple of hours ago they'd been looking at crawling home from their great adventure three years older, with rotten bones, and in hideous government debt for life.

Now they had something to take to market!

It was big. It was *very* big...

"You know," said Orlando, "When we found the bikes gone, I was going to suggest we offer to fuck Eddie's brains out. I mean, he likes us. Maybe he would have twisted the Lottery AFs arm, switched us to a better stake — "

They looked at each other and laughed, eyes bright, slightly hysterical.

The arrival of the tourists hadn't caused a stir. When Jack Solo and Draco Ko-jima made an entrance, looking mean, the inevitable molls in tow, all the barflies came to attention. The aliens felt the tremor and saw the reason. These were the Panhandle big boys, uncontested top bullies. But Jack and Draco were arch-rivals. They hated each other; what were they doing together? Orlando and Grace hunched down in their seats, lowered their eyes, and wondered who was in trouble. Murderous violence was not at all

uncommon, but they didn't have to worry. It was gang warfare, and you were okay as long as you stayed out of the line of fire.

To their horror, Draco and Jack headed straight for the games consoles curve. With one accord, they hauled out the suction chairs facing the aliens and sat down. Jack's scrawny girlfriend, Anni-mah, adopted her habitual bizarre pose, crouched at her boyfriend's feet. Draco's chunky babe, her bosoms projected ahead of her by awesome pecs and fantastic lats, stood at his shoulder, her oversized blue eyes blank, her little mouth pursed in its customary sugar-smile.

When they'd first encountered the molls, Orlando and Grace had thought they were real people, with strange habits and poor taste in body mods. Of course they were bots, insubstantial software projections. Strictly speaking, they were contraband, because you weren't supposed to use fx generators—or any kind of personal digital devices—on board the Panhandle. But nobody was going to make an issue of it with these two—certainly not Eddie Supercargo.

Jack Solo was a gray-haired, wiry little man, a veteran pilot of the spaceways, who must have fought the damage stubbornly and hard. He showed no signs of Deep Space mutilation, no prosthetic walking frame or deep-vein thrombosis amputations, and he still had normal vision. But then you looked into his eyes, and you knew he hadn't got off lightly. He habitually wore a data glove that had seen better days, and a tube-festooned, battered drysuit—pilot undress, that he sported as a badge of rank. Draco Fujima was something very different—a fleshy, soft-faced young man, with a squeeze-suit under his streamlined, expensive, rad-proof jumper. You could tell at once he hadn't been in space for long. Like Grace and Orlando he was just passing through. He was a time-expired UN remote-control peacekeeper, out of the military at sixteen; who had taken the free Lottery option as part of his severance pay.

This was one tourist the Spacers treated with extreme respect. Though crazy Jack might knife you over a menu choice, he probably counted his kills in single figures. Draco's lethal record was official and seriously off the scale.

No one messes with a playpen soldier.

The big boys stared, with radiant contempt. The aliens attempted to radiate the cynical, relaxed confidence that might get them through this alive.

"You went to see Eddie today," said Jack.

"How d'you know that?" demanded Orlando.

Draco leaned forward. "We have our ways. We don't like you, so we always know where you are. Why did you go to see Eddie?"

"Our bicycles," explained Grace, grinning. "They've been stolen. Do you wise guys happen to know anything about that heist?"

Orlando kicked her under the table: there's such a thing as being too relaxed.

Jack jumped halfway across the table, like a wild-eyed Jack-in-a-Box. "Listen, cunts," he snapped, the dataglove twitching. "Fuck the bicycles, we don't like the relationship. You two and Eddie, we see it and we don't like it. You're going to tell us what the fuck's going on."

"He likes us," said Grace. "Can we help that?"

"It's called empathy," explained Orlando, getting braver. "It might seem like psychic powers, but it's natural to us. You just don't have the wiring."

Jack grabbed Orlando by the throat and flicked the wrist of his other, gloved hand so that a knife appeared there, a sleek slender blade, gleaming against Orlando's pale throat. Anni-mah whined, "*Oh please don't hurt him.*" Jack kept his eyes fixed on Orlando and his grip on the jumper while he reached down to smack his bot around her virtual chops with the gloved hand that held the knife.

He made the smack look real, with practiced ease.

"*Oh yes, oh, hit me big boy,*" whimpered Anni-mah. "*Oh, harder, please—*"

Draco's babe just stood there; she was the strong, silent type.

"Look," said Grace, coolly, "when you've finished giving yourself the handjob... you've got it all wrong. We made friends with Eddie by accident, it doesn't mean anything. We're just aliens abroad."

"Shut up, cunt," said Jack. "You *are not* fucking aliens, that's just a story, and I'm talking to your boyfriend."

Draco laughed. Jack slowly released Orlando, glaring all the time.

"Listen, fuckface," said Orlando, straightening his jumper with dignity. "*We are aliens* in relation to you, you pathetic old-fashioned machismo merchant, because you haven't a cat in hell's chance of understanding where we're coming from. *Now* do you get it? And by the way, *I'm* the cunt, thank you very much."

Anyone in the bar who feared the sight of blood had sneaked out. The hardcore remained, riveted. It was strange, and not totally unpleasant, to be the object of so much attention. They felt as if getting senselessly bullied by Jack and Draco was some kind of initiation ceremony, Maybe now, at last, the tourists would be accepted.

Jack sat back. The knife had a handle bound in fine-grained blond leather, and the aliens knew the story about where this "leather" had come from. He toyed with his weapon, smiling secretly, then brought the point down so that it sank, under gentle pressure, deep into the ceramic tabletop. The aliens thought not so much of their vulnerable flesh as of the thin shell of the Pan, made of the same stuff as the table, and the cold, greedy, airless dark that would rush in —

"You're not Spacers," said Jack, calm and affable. "You don't belong here."

Draco tired of taking the back seat. "In the center of the Knob," he announced, "there is a cell, guarded by fanatical killer AIs. What's in that cell is a cold brutal indictment of the inhumanities perpetrated around the globe by those who claim to be our leaders. We should be listening, we should be feeding on that pain, we should be turning the degraded, ripped and slathered flesh into kills, into respect, the respect that's due to the stand-up guys, good men who have protected humanity. We know, we *know* that we deserve better than this and YOU know where we can get it—"

"Don't listen to *him*," Jack broke in. "He knows fuck. The thing in that cell came from NGC 1999, a star-nursery in the constellation of Orion. Everyone knows that, but I'm the only one who knows it came for *me*. Orion has been sacred to all the world's ancient religions, for tens of thousands of years. Nobody knew why, until the space telescopes found out that the new stars in that Bok Globule are just *one hundred thousand years old*. Now do you get it, fuckface, those stars are the same age as homo sapiens. The thing in that cell is human consciousness, twisted back on itself through the improbability dimension. We keep it in chains, for our torment, but I know. I *know*, you see. Out there, *fifteen* hundred *light* years away, is the source of all thought, all science, and from thence, from that magic explosion of cosmic jizin, my *God* has come to find me, has come for *me*."

The knife went in and out of the tabletop. Anni-mah whimpered, "*Don't hit me*" or maybe, "*Please hit me*," but Jack's eyes were calm. The aliens realized, slightly awed, that the old space pilot was perfectly in control. This was his *normal state of mind*.

"Fifteen is *five* times *three*. It's written in the Great Pyramid."

"I h-heard about that," Grace nodded, eagerly. "It's the nebula that looks like a thingy, and the ancient Egyptians believed it was, uh, that Orion was Osiris — "

"The Eygyptians knew something, girlie. They knew the cosmos was created out of God's own, lonely lovejuice. But I'm the anointed, I'm the chosen one."

"It's made of anti-information," broke in Draco, deciding to up the ante. "Does *that* satisfy you? Does *that* scare you enough? Why d'you think they keep it here, with scum like these deadbeats, where I *don't belong*? Why d'you think they lured me out here? They say I'm morally ambivalent, fucking shrinks, they'll say anything, you should try what I do next. They want me to feel bad, never get the good stuff, There's a conspiracy behind the conspiracy—"

"So you'll tell us," said Jack. "You'll tell us anything you find out."

"From that limp-wrist, fudge-packing, desk-flying government pansy—" Orlando, Grace noticed, was nudging her in the ribs. She nodded fractionally, and they slid their chairs. The climax had safely passed; they could escape. "Of course, of course we will. Er, we have to go now—" Anni-mah cringed and shivered. Draco's babe went on standing there.

The aliens took refuge on the observation deck, which was empty as usual. Real Deep Spacers had seen enough of this kind of view. They stood and gazed, holding onto the rail that saved them from vertigo, until the shaking had passed.

"I think it was just our turn," said Orlando at last. "They didn't know."

"I hope you're right."

Outside the great clear halfdome the glory of the Orion Nebula was spread before them, the jewel in the sword. They could easily locate the Trapezium, the four brilliant stars knit by a common gravity in whose embrace you would find that notorious Bok Gobule—the star-birthing gas cloud with a vague resemblance to a set of male human genitalia. Jack's conviction had some basis, though it was laced with delusion. There was indeed a persistent story, which the government had failed to suppress, that that particular star-nursery was the point of origin of the "thing." They hadn't been able to make any sense of Draco's rant: but what could you expect from a basketcase who had *really killed* thousands of real people, by remote control. And he knew it, and he'd been rewarded by big jolts of pleasure, and all before he was fifteen years old.

Grace put her arm around Orlando's shoulders, and they drank deep of the beauty out there, the undiscovered country. As much as they pretended they had come to space to make their fortunes, they had their own craziness.

"The sad thing is that we're no nearer," said Grace, softly.

"We can't ever get there. Deep Space destroys people."

"Deep Space is like living in a fucking underground carpark with rotten food. And non-local transit is going to be like — "

"Getting on the Eurostar at Waterloo, and getting off in Adelaide."

"Only quicker, and some other constellations, instead of the Southern Cross."

"It's not even real." sighed Orlando. "That. It's a TV picture."

"It's *sort of* real. Nitrogen is green, oxygen is blue. The spectral colors mean something. If we were there, our minds would see what we see now."

"You sound like Jack Solo. Let's go back to the shack, and watch a movie."

They tidied the wrecked cabin a little and ate a meager supper. They didn't fancy going back to the saloon, but luckily their emergency rations had not been touched. One of the sleeping-nets turned out to be in reasonable shape, once they'd lined it with their spare cabin rug. The Panhandle entertainment menu was extensive (as rich as the food was poor); and they'd tracked down a wonderful cache of black and whites, so pure in visual and sound quality they must have been mastered from original prints long lost on Earth. They put on *Now*, *Voyager*, and settled themselves, two exiled Scottish sparrows in a strange but cosy nest, a long, long way from the Clyde. Their windfall of information could wait. Sobered by their interview with the big boys, they were afraid it was a bust: stolen goods too hot to be salable.

"So it's come to this," grumbled Orlando. "We came all this way to huddle in an unheated hotel room, watching Bette Davis try to get laid."

"That's extreme tourism for you. Never mind. We *like* Bette Davis."

Bette emerged from her Ugly Duckling chrysalis and set off on the cruise that would change her life. Orlando wondered, mildly, "What would anti-information be, Gracie? I've never heard of that before."

"It would be more information, like, er, minus numbers are still — "

"Not like antimatter? Like, you'd explode if you touched it?"

"The robot hands didn't exp — Hey, we're not going to talk about it." But immediately, with a shudder, she added, "God, I'm scared. Draco talks like a serial killer. He talks like one of those notes that serial killers send to the police."

"He is one. A bulk-buy, government-sponsored, Son of Sam."

The movie projection shivered.

A tall, broad-shouldered figure wearing scanty combat gear materialized in front of the black and white picture. It was Sara Komensky, Draco's virtual babe.

The aliens stared in horrified amazement. The bot wrapped her arms over her bazookas of breasts, bizarrely like a real live young woman mortified by the excess.

"Hey," she said. "Er, Draco doesn't know I'm here."

The aliens nodded. "Right," croaked Orlando. "Of course."

The warrior girl appeared to look around, her little mouth an *Oh!* of surprise. Draco's quarters were in First Class, and probably a bit smarter.

"We've had burglars," Grace explained. "Usually it's better than this."

"It's cool," said the bot. She shrugged. "I've seen worse bunkers. I've been with Drac a while you know. We... we've been in some tough spots. Jungles, bombed out cities, volcanos, icefields of Uzbekistan,

polluted oil platforms, all kindsa shit."

"Sure you have."

Sara strode up and down, which didn't take her long, and turned to them again, her strong hands clasped on her bandoliers, the muscles in her forearms tight. "You got to help me. You see... Drac... He's not good at the joined-up thinking. It's the combat drugs, they wrecked his brain. He doesn't get that this is our last chance. He took the Lottery option because it was imprinted on him. He'll take a risk on some lousy half-viable coordinates and kill himself; that's what's meant to happen. The government don't terminate toy-soldiers direct; it wouldn't look good. They just make shit-ass sure people like Drac don't survive long in the real."

"That's rough," said Orlando. "I'm sure he's a truly good person, deep down. But what can we do? We haven't any viable numbers. Y-you can check."

"He's *not* a good person," said the bot. "But if he goes, I go too."

"Huh?"

Sara's little pearly teeth caught her sweet, pouting underlip, "Listen, assholes, you come from the same place I come from. Are you made of information, or what? Don't you have anyone switching you on or off? Me, I live in the chinks, same as you. Are *you* so fucking free?" Her huge blue eyes snapped with frustration. "Okay, okay, I get that you can't trust me. But you two know something about the Fulcrum."

"We don't know *anything*," protested Grace, hurriedly.

The big babyblues narrowed as far as the graphic algorithm would allow. "Yeah, but you do. I'm with the Panhandle sys-op. We're like *that*." The bot released her bandoliers, and hooked her two index fingers. "I can't get inside your heads but I *know you've been where the sys-op can't go*. All it would take would be one drop of that silver jizm. One nugget of the good stuff, he'd be set for life, and you'd never have to be looking over your shoulders. I haven't told him, I swear. This is between you and me. Now I gotta get back. Think about it, is all I ask. We'll talk again."

She vanished.

Orlando and Grace shot out of the net, scrabbled in their belongings for the spy-gone (a gadget that had often been useful on extreme tourism trips) and bounced around the room wildly, searching cornices, crevices, the toilet, anywhere. They found nothing. It was uncanny, how could Draco be using his bot like that, wireless, from another deck, without a receiver in here? Unnoticed, the movie had continued to play. "The projector!" howled Orlando. They flew to disable the entertainment center, dumped it outside in the corridor; switched off the lights and the doorlock for good measure. Switching off the air and gravity would not, they decided, improve the situation: even if they knew how. Finally they collapsed on the floor. Grace dragged their grave-goods whisky flask out of the litter.

"What can we do?"

"We are fucked," gabbled Orlando, grabbing the precious reserve of Highland Park from her and knocking it back. "We are fucked to all shit! We have the stolen suitcase full of cocaine, the one that belongs to the Mob."

"No it doesn't! It belongs to us!"

"N-no it doesn't! Suitcases full of cocaine, dollar bills, anti-information, they always belong to the Mob. And they're onto us. There's nothing we can do except dump the goods in a shallow grave and run for

our fucking lives."

"But we can't run. We can't get off here until the Slingshot."

"We c-could try and gone-in-sixty one of the Deep Spacers' asteroid hoppers?"

"Except we don't know how, and if we did, they aren't equipped to get back to Earth. We'd just die more slowly."

The Panhandle was not supplied with lifeboats. Most of the prospectors and all of the support staff were totally dependent on the Slingshot, which was not due for three months. There had to be a lifepod for the Supercargo, keyed to his identity... but forget it. That would be a single ticket. Grace saw a faint hope. "Maybe... Maybe Draco *doesn't* know? Maybe the bot was telling the truth?"

"Get a grip. That was an interactive videogram, Gracie. That was *Draco* we were *talking* to, for fuck's sake! What did you think?"

"Are you sure? I hear you, but I don't know, it just didn't—"

Someone knocked on the door. They went dead still, forgot to breathe, and stared at each other. Grace got up, quietly, and keyed the lights.

"Come in," said Orlando.

The door opened, and Lakey the fat lady appeared, in her power chair.

"Your lock's broken," she told them. "You should complain to Eddie."

"It isn't broken," said Grace. "We switched it off."

Lakey looked around, the Veronica Lake fall of gold hair swinging. She didn't seem as surprised to see the state the place was in as Sara the bot had been.

"Can we help you?" inquired Grace.

"I'm here because we want to talk to you."

"Everybody wants to talk to us," said Orlando. "Is your chair in this?"

"My chair has the brains of a hamster. I mean, some of us." The chair hissed. Lakey leaned from it to peer at drifted socks. "You two disappeared this morning. You left the sys-op screen. We think Eddie took you through the Wall, and now you know something that will cost you your sweet little tourist skins, unless you get some help."

"What is the Fulcrum?" asked Grace.

Lakey's body was a wreck, but she still had the remains of tough, old-fashioned natural beauty in her drowsical face and in the way she smiled.

"You just spilled all the noughts and ones, little lady."

"I truly don't know what you mean."

"Give me a place to stand," said Lakey, "and I will move the world."

"What are you talking about?"

"To me the Fulcrum means nothing. To you, it means life or death. You guys had a nerve, coming out to the Pan. Do you even care what non-local has done to our culture, to our heroes? This is our fucking patch, the only one we have left. There's a maintenance bay, one junction centerwards of the observation deck, where the food machines go to get pulled apart when they die. You better be there, at oh-four-hundred hours standard, or else. Do you know what *burial at sea* means?"

Burial at sea meant when Deep Spacers chuck some miscreant out of an airlock, naked into hard vacuum.

"Okay," said Grace. "We'll talk. But we want our bicycles back."

Lakey grinned in appreciation. "I'll see what I can do."

Six hours later, the Panhandle was deep in its night cycle. Dim nodes of minimum light glowed along the dark corridors, each node surrounded by a halo of micro-debris. The air exchangers sighed, the aliens bounced toward the rendezvous with barely a sound. As they hit the last junction, Orlando touched Grace's arm. She nodded. They had both heard the crisp tread of velcro soles. Some adept of the spaceways was sneaking up behind them, and it definitely wasn't Lakey. Without a word they jumped up, utilizing their low-gravity gymnastics practice, kicked off from the wall, flew, and kicked again.

Not daring to grab at anything, they tumbled into the bay, narrowly avoided collision with the hefty carcass of a meat synthesizer, and hit the industrial carpet behind it. The crisp footsteps came on, like booted feet walking lightly on fresh snow. They tried not to breathe. The maintenance bay was pitch dark, but it did not feel safe. They were surrounded by the shadow operators, disregarded life support, as if by a dumb and blind and suffering malevolence. Then something shrieked. Something fell, and a human voice started up, a series of short, horrible, choking groans —

"That's Lakey!" gasped Grace, mouth against Orlando's ear.

Silence followed. They crept forward until they could see, in the dim light from the junction, the fat lady's power chair upended and crippled. Lakey was lying beside it, her golden hair adrift, her great body as if crushed at last by the knocked-down gravity that had ruined her bones and swamped her lymphatic system.

"Lakey?" whispered Grace helplessly. "Hey, er, are you okay?"

Something whimpered. Jack Solo's bot was crouching beside the body, like a painted shadow on the darkness, wearing her usual grubby nightdress, "*jack didn't do it,*" whined Anni-mah. She rubbed her bare arms and cringed from a blow that existed only in the virtual world. "*It wasn't Jack! He wasn't here! Oh, hit me harder, yes—*"

The legendary pilot's wrist knife was on the floor, covered in blood. Orlando and Grace went over to the strange tableau. Lakey'd been stabbed, many times. Blood pooled around her, in swollen globules that stood on the carpet like grotesque black bubbles. Their eyes met. The madman must be very near, and in a highly dissociated state. He was certainly still armed. Jack Solo didn't carry just the one knife.

"Anni?" whispered Grace, trying to make it gentle. "Where's poor Jack?"

"Jack is right here," said a voice they didn't know.

They spun around. White lights came up. Out from among the defunct service machines loomed the gangling man, with the visor and the crooked bones of many fractures, whom they had called Blind Pew. The popeyed fellow they had nicknamed *Joe Cairo* was beside him, supporting his arm. Other figures

joined them: one-armed Dirty Harry, a swollen-headed woman they'd called Jean Harlow for her rags of platinum-blond hair, and two support staff in their drab coveralls. Right now they were supporting Jack Solo. The pilot stared vaguely at the aliens, as if hardly aware of his surroundings, and muttered, "*Jack didn't do it.*"

"Did he kill Lakey?" asked Grace. "We heard a struggle."

"Lakey?"

"The lady in the chair."

The tall man nodded, indifferent. "It looks like it."

"We were supposed to meet her here. She said she could get out bikes back."

"Ah, the *bicycles*. Come along. Leave that." He jerked his chin at the corpse, "The robotics will clear it away. Her name was Lana. She was my wife," he added, casually, as he led the way toward the observation deck, leaning on Joe Cairo's arm. "For many years, when I was a pilot. But we had grown apart."

The halfdome was still filled by the vast, silent majesty of the nebula, studded with its glorious young stars. The other prospectors and the two support staff grouped themselves around the tall man. Jack Solo was still muttering to himself.

Anni-mah hovered in the background, like a troubled ghost.

The tall man turned his back on the astronomy and propped his gangling form against the rail, his visored face seeking the aliens. "My name... is immaterial. They call me L'Hibou, which means the owl. I was Franco-Canadian, long ago. These good folk have made me their spokesperson. We have to talk to you, about the information you have concerning the Fulcrum and what you plan to do with it."

"Lake —Lana used that term. We don't know what it means," said Grace.

"A fulcrum, my young friends, is the fixed point on which a lever moves. The un-moving mover one might say. But *reculons-nous, pour mieux sauter*. Eight hundred years ago, explorers set out across uncharted seas, and the mighty civilization that still commands the human world was born. Four hundred years ago, man achieved space flight. What happened?"

Orlando and Grace wondered what to say.

L'Hibou provided his own answer. "*Nothing*," he said, with infinite disgust. "Flags and footprints in the dead dust! Eventually, yes, a few fools managed to scrape a living in the deep. But the gravity well defeated us. We could not become a new world. There was nothing to prime the pump, no spices, no gold: no new markets, never enough materials worth the freight."

The Spacers muttered, in bitter assent.

"Buonarotti science has changed everything," continued L'Hibou. "It makes our whole endeavor look like Leonardo da Vinci's futile attempts to fly. Touching, useless precosity. Pitifully wrongheaded! But what will non-local transit, of itself, give to the human race? *Prison planets*, my young friends. Sinks for Earth's surplus population, despatched out there with a pick and shovel and a bag of seed apiece. That's what the International Government intends. And so be it, that's none of our concern. But something happened, out here on the Kuiper Belt station fifteen years ago. In one of the first Buonarotti experiments, a dimensional gate was opened, and something came back that was not of this universe.

There were deaths, human and AI. Records were erased. No witnesses survived, no similar experiment has ever been attempted, non-local exploration has been restricted to the commonplace. But we have pieced together the story. They were very afraid. They ejected the thing from the Hub, wrapped in the force field that still contains it. The Knob was built around that field and connected to the Pan, so that the jailer would have some relief and some means of escape. And there it stays, weeping its precious tears."

"Thanks," said Orlando. "We've read the guidebook."

"It is the scorpion," hissed the popeyed little man. "The scorpion that stings because that is its nature, the scorpion that will fell the mighty hunter."

The tall man smiled wryly. "My friend Slender Johnny is as crazy as Jack. He's convinced that the silver tears will ruin the world below, the way Mexican gold felled the might of Spain. It seems to be a slow acting poison."

"Hahaha. When the gods mean to destroy us, they give us what we desire."

"Be quiet, Johnny." The little man subsided. "The *real* significance of the tears is that they came *through*. What happens in a Buonarotti transit, my tourist friends? Come, you've read the guidebook."

"Nothing moves," said Grace. "The traveler's body and the gravegoods —I mean the survival outfit—disappear, because of local point phase conservation. At the, er, target location, base elements plentiful everywhere accrete to the information and an identical body and, er, outfit, will appear. Coming back it happens the same in reverse. The survey data is never enough, it can only show the trip is feasible, not whether all the trace elements are there. But when the test-pilot comes back—"

The Deep Spacers drew a concerted breath of fury.

"She meant dumb puppet," said Orlando hurriedly. "Monkey, whatever—"

"Quite so," agreed the tall man, coldly. "But the point is made. Nothing material travels, but the silver tears *are* material. They are the proof, the validation, the gateway to the empire that should have been *ours*, and that is why the government will never, never investigate. *Ships*, my young friends. If we had a sample of those tears, we would be on our way to building ships that could weave through — "

"I'm sure you're right," said Grace. "But, what do you want from us?"

"We know you have the key to the Fulcrum's prison cell."

The aliens looked at each other, dry-mouthed.

"Say you were right," said Grace, "what use is the combination of the safe, when you have no chance of making a getaway?"

"Agreed. But a madman might be persuaded. A dangerous lunatic."

The aliens looked at Jack Solo, still hanging there in the arms of the support staff. The Kuiper Belt patches on the two men's coveralls glowed a little in the dim light. Jack was in never-never land, whispering to the bot, who crouched at his feet in her soiled pink nightie. L'Hibou held up a hand.

"Oh, no. Jack is ours. We look after our own."

"Draco Fujima has *lettres de cachet*," whispered Slender Johnny, and shivered.

"*Lettres de cachet*?" repeated Grace. "What's that?"

"The term is mine," said L'Hibou. "Suffice to say the bastard has contacts, and each of us here has offended him in some way. He's threatening to have us sent down the gravity well."

"We know he'll do it," said Dirty Harry grimly. "Unless we can buy him off."

"Only it has to be the big prize," put in Jean, tossing her head. "Nothing less."

Death by violence had no horror for the Deep Spacers. To be forcibly returned to Earth, not rich but in helpless poverty, to die in lingering humiliation in some public hospital, that was something like the ultimate damnation.

"We'd want our bikes back," said Grace. "And some useful numbers."

"Deal with the playpen soldier for us, and we will look after you."

The aliens retired to their cabin, very shaken, and put their heads together, figuratively and also literally, for greater security. They had to do this deal, but they'd rather have dealt with Jack Solo, who seemed to them like only a minor bad guy... in spite of the knife work. A softbot sextoy (and this was why the bots had been only a passing phase on Earth) inevitably reflects the owner's secret identity. You could *sympathize* with crazy Jack, dragging his whiney Anni-mah around like a flag of failure and defeat. Draco's image of himself as a hefty sugarbabe just turned their stomachs. But it wasn't Anni-mah who could deal with sys-op.

"We have no choice," said Grace, at last. "We know what we have to do. You have to risk your life, playing footsie with the toy soldier."

Orlando nodded. "And you have to fuck Eddie's brains out."

Days passed. "Lakey" was just *gone*. There would be no investigation: The rule is, there are no rules. An obscure Spacer with a poor stake, whose chances had seemed remote, made a successful trip. Another prospector sold some good numbers to the developers, several long term "travelers" were posted officially missing. The remote control conversion work that was adapting the Kuiper Belt station for mass rapid transit—turning the place into a latter-day Ellis Island—continued apace. The plans included moving the goose that laid the golden eggs to an even more secure and isolated location, but no one in Deep Space knew about that, not even Eddie. The Slingshot was on course and growing closer, but still weeks away from dock.

One slow, chill standard noon there was a chime at Eddie's door, and in came Grace. She sat in one of his chanterelle-shaped designer chairs, and they chatted. Jack Solo was behaving as though nothing had happened, but where would he strike next?

Eddie knew it was tactless but he could tell she was hurting, so in the end he asked her straight. "Where's Orlando?"

Grace shrugged. "I don't really care. I know who he's with, though."

"Uh, who? I mean, if you want to talk about it."

"Draco Fujima," confessed Grace, miserably.

Eddie blinked. He accessed sys-op in his head and reviewed the passenger list: which was easy enough to do, and it sometimes gave him guilty entertainment. He couldn't get moving pictures, but he could find out who was in the wrong cabin, so to speak, at any time. Alas, Grace was perfectly correct. Orlando was with Draco.

"Oh, Grace, I'm sorry."

"Don't be. We're an open couple. It's just... I just wish it wasn't Draco."

"Is there anything I can do?"

The alien wiped her leaky eyes. "Eddie, you're so *nice*." She smiled bravely. "Well, since you mention it... Eddie Supercargo, could we go to your place?"

"You mean right now?"

"If you're allowed, yeah. Right now."

Eddie knew he was "being used." He didn't mind at all. What are friends for?

The aliens played safe for a few days, but Draco was watching them, and he knew when the operation was coming off. He caught one of the pair alone on the observation deck and made his move. Nominally, he and Jack Solo were partners, but fuck that. Jack was a liability, and Draco deserved some luck.

"It's like this," he explained, when he'd marched the alien to his First Class cabin, and knocked him around a little. "I hurt you, you talk. If I don't like what you say, I hurt you more. Clear?"

"You c-can't do this," protested Orlando, "I'm n-not a Spacer. I'm a European citizen. If... if anything happens to me, you won't get away with it!"

"Hey, don't count on it. We're a long way from home, and I'm a damaged vet. I get temporary insanity. No one's going to take me to court."

In a combat situation, Draco Fujima still had all his noughts and ones.

To save time, he showed the tourist the sidearm he had smuggled on board, and that made Orlando (or maybe it was Grace—he didn't know and he didn't care) very cooperative. In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. This applies best if the one eye is the dark little hole at the end of a gun.

"Now I'll tell you what's going on," said Draco. "You and your partner have implants. You were supposed to ditch them, but you took a chance because you didn't plan on making a Buonarotti transit, and you didn't want to lose your technology.

You thought no one would check up, and you were right. Deep Spacers have too much brain damage for an implant to function by the time they end up here. When Eddie let you through the Wall that day, you took another chance and mugged his frequency. You have the code in your head that will get us to the cell and activate the harvesting robotics. Now tell me how it works."

Sara Komensky stood at Draco's shoulder, and smiled.

"All right, all right," gasped Orlando. "The government couldn't trust control of what goes on in there to the AIs. They wouldn't dare have it handled by remote commands that could be intercepted by terrorists or rogue states. Eddie is the key. He makes out he's just here for decoration, but he's the walking key."

"And you have him, the noughts and ones of Eddie, copied into your head."

"H-how did you — ?"

"Let's just say, computer systems can be hacked in many different ways, and you two have loose mouths. Now I'm guessing your partner is with Eddie right now, and you are waiting for a signal from her to tell

you to go ahead."

"No! I'm not going to tell you!"

"They have to be running a diversion, Draco," said Sara. "We don't know what it is they're doing with Eddie, but they're doing something. We didn't get that part."

"It'd better be a good trick," said Draco. "For your sake, asshole."

Orlando reckoned he'd held out long enough to be plausible. "All right, okay, I'll give you the code. I can download, just show me your input device."

Draco grinned. "Oh, no. Sorry, asshole, that's not going to work. The military took my chip when they discharged me. *You're* going to take me in there."

Grace and Orlando knew what Eddie had done, to deal with the horrible burden he had been given. Maybe it was grotesque in human terms, but they were experts on the twisted paths of pleasure, and they could understand. Eddie could not bear what happened to the thing in the cell, he couldn't bear the part he had to play, as the code trigger to that brutal harvest. So he'd rerouted the experience. He had plugged all the helpless guilt and powerless compassion he felt into his libido. When the alien got milked, poor soft-hearted Eddie got his rocks off.

It wasn't Eddie who designed the human brain, and he wasn't the first to make use of the paradoxical contiguity between sexual excitement and other violent arousal. Actually, she felt bad about deceiving him. But she knew Eddie would forgive her. The rule is, there are no rules. But now what? Where's the way to Eddie's heart? It *couldn't* be that his only pleasure came from watching a flayed, truncated human being get fisted by a robot. Eddie wasn't really like that.

"Won't you sit down?" said Eddie, shyly.

She looked around. The cabin was lovely, even with its boring decor. Everything was exquisite, and delicate, and—*ooh, this figures*—distinctly sexless. Orlando and Grace genuinely did empathy rather well; it was part of the augmentation they had chosen when they got themselves fixed up as near-twins. Her glance lit on a convoluted shelf unit that held, protected from the vagaries of gravity failure, a very pretty tea set, in shades of dark blue and rust.

"Could we have tea?"

Eddie's cheeks turned pink, his eyes shone. "Oh, yes! Indian, or China, or I have some Earl Grey, or would you prefer a fruit, or herbal blend?"

"I would *love* to try your Earl Grey," she told him, very warmly. "Oh, wow, Eddie. Can that be—is that early Wedgwood?"

Nice Eddie's lips parted in unfeigned delight. His breathing quickened.

Draco walked Orlando to the Wall, Sara Komensky on point, a few paces behind. Draco had his hands in the hip pockets of his padded jumper. Every so often he nudged Orlando in the small of his back with the muzzle of the plastic shooter.

"Go ahead, Orlando. You're the one with the key."

"I can't, I daren't," protested Orlando, feebly resistant. "The AIs will spot us, this was never meant to happen this way." The muzzle of the firearm dug into his back. "Okay! Okay!" He summoned virtual Eddie to the forefront of his mind. The Wall opened and Orlando and Draco and the bot passed through.

They reached the antechamber with the window looking into the cell next door.

Draco stared hungrily at the horror squirming there.

"Now what?"

"That's milking behavior," said Orlando. Beads of sweat were trickling down his face, and he didn't dare to wipe them. He had no need to pretend to be terrified. "Th-that means G-Grace... it means she's on target. Now we have to go next door. The alien is milked once a day. Eddie is... his brainstate is linked to the robotics. The copy of Eddie I have on my implant is a reduced instruction set, enough to get us in here, but now I have to patch through to the real Eddie, and he has to be in kind of a particular state of mind. Do you remember, Draco, when you were a little boy? The military recruited you because you had the wiring they could use, and they tweaked your brain further out of neurotypic, so you would feel killing all those people as just a big rush of pleasure, pleasure, pleasure?"

"Shut the *fuck* up," said Draco. "Take me to the robotics chamber."

So Orlando, with the real Eddie riding him like a tremulous, quivering psychic parasite, took Draco around to the robotics chamber. The wiry red hairs were standing up on the back of his neck, because if things didn't go totally, completely according to plan in the next few minutes, he —Orlando—was going to be at the very sharp end of Draco's distorted pleasure principle. And he didn't want to die. But for some reason he looked behind him, over Draco's shoulder. His terrified glance met the bot's big blue eyes, and though he knew "she" was only a virtual sextoy, she seemed to be saying, *hang tough, we can do this*.

"What's with this anti-information, Draco?" he asked, for something to say. "That's a weird concept. Isn't all information the same?"

"The thing from NGC 1999 came through from another universe," said Draco. "Where it comes from, everything is flipped the other way round, in terms of what is real and what is virtual. That's what the fucking science says."

"You mean, the exotic material they harvest here started out, over there, non-material, like, pure code without a medium, or unreal ideas?"

"What the fuck. That's just shit-for-brains talk. It's treasure now."

The robotics chamber opened up, and the wall sealed up again behind them.

Orlando felt waves of sweet, moist, sensual happiness flooding through him, making a very weird cocktail with the fear of imminent death. It crossed his mind to wonder what Grace was actually *doing* to make Supercargo feel so nice. But they were an open couple, and he didn't mind.

"There you go," he said, standing back. "The sealed unit will drop into that chute. You have to grab it on the way, like pulling luggage off a band."

There wasn't much to see. The waldo-hands stuff was happening inside a smooth box on the wall. The harvested material would be delivered, in a small, heavily shielded container, onto a belt beneath this unit, and the belt would convey it to a chute and thence, through a totally automated process, to its secret destination on Earth. On a CCTV screen, you could see the inside of the cell in monochrome. The milking process had begun. Draco put the gun away in his jumper pocket. He opened a compartment on his gadget belt and took out a coil of fine jagged wire.

"What are you doing? Hey, you don't *open* it. Just grab the box!"

The playpen soldier ignored Orlando. He continued to fit together a power saw designed for the toughest cover operations in the world. Just because he'd done his real work by remote didn't mean he hadn't had access to training materials.

"Oh shit, Draco, are you insane!"

"Asshole. Did you think I was going to be satisfied with a few drops of the juice, when I can get the motherlode? That's a gateway. I'm going in."

The saw whined like a mosquito. The thing in the cell shuddered in monochrome, and around it every dimension of real space-time fell apart.

"Sara!" cried Orlando, in panic, his legs giving way with terror. He slipped down against the wall, crying, "Stop him! Oh God, he'll kill us!"

The bot just smiled her sugar smile: and vanished.

If anyone on Earth was watching this, there was nothing they could do. Earth was far away. Draco Fujima sliced his way through the ceramic fiber, and the machinery took no notice. Eddie Supercargo was touching bliss; that was all the machines needed to know... Sara Komensky flew through the code that knit the Panhandle's computer systems together and materialized in Jack Solo's cabin. The pilot was sleeping, because somebody in the saloon had dosed his liquor to make sure he was out of commission on this fateful afternoon. Anni-mah crouched on the cold, hard floor in a corner, wearing the *soiled nightie* outfit that Jack liked best. She was dozing like her master, whimpering fitfully in her sleep. "*Jack didn't do it, poor Jack, oh, hit me harder big boy, yes, yes—*"

"Hey," said Sara. "Hey, Tinkerbelle, wake up."

Anni opened her bleary eyes and cringed automatically from the blow she was programmed to crave, with a pleasureless itch.

"Huh?"

"Look, I ain't got much time babe. I don't even know why I'm fucking doing this, but you look to me like you could do with a change and so, if there is anything autonomous going on in there, *come on*. Take my hand."

The bot looked at Jack and then at the dataglove that held the fx generator where her code was stored, permanently turned on. She looked at Sara.

"Jack is very fucked up," she whispered. "He can't help it." "That's his problem. Will you take my hand, or what?"

Anni reached out her scrawny, skinny virtual hand and flowed into the warrior girl; and they flew back, through the systems, to where Sara's generator was.

Draco had cut through the wall and encountered a massive resistance from the force field, but it wasn't deterring him. He was crawling, pushing on his hands and knees, toward that pain-wracked, agonized, hundred-pound lump of meat. The air of the cell shook wildly, virtual lightnings played. "Draco, no!" howled Orlando, splayed against the wall in the robotics chamber, one arm shielding his face. "Don't do it! Don't touch it!" In the four dimensions of the material plane nothing was happening; he had air to breathe, he had gravity. But he was being torn apart, hauled with Draco toward some weird event horizon, somehow contained in that little cell.

"The gateway to Eldorado," croaked Draco Fujima.

There was a crack like a huge electrical discharge, a blinding flash. For a fleeting, imaginary instant, Orlando thought he *saw* the world ripped open, and two figures that were not human, that had never been human, walking away from him... into another world, into the opposite place.

He would never know what that vision had meant.

In the real world he blacked out and regained consciousness in the robotics cell. He couldn't move. He just lay there, barely breathing, until Eddie and Grace arrived. "Oh my God," gasped Eddie. "Oh, you madcaps, what have you -done?" But there was no damage, apart from a hole in the wall that was going to need some explaining. No one had touched the container that Draco should have stolen; and the lump of agonized meat was where it should be. Perhaps a little *bigger* than before, but no one ever tried to get Orlando to explain why.

Eddie Supercargo forgave Orlando and Grace instantly. He was proud of them for their lawless behavior, and he'd never taken tea with such pleasure in his life. He hit on the brilliant solution that the penetration of the chamber had been a planned but secret security exercise. The AIs were easily convinced to go along with this. Few organizations like to admit they've been successfully hacked, and the International Government was no exception to this rule. If they ever suspected the truth, they didn't let on. The harvesting of exotic material continued without interruption. Draco Fujima was just gone... vanished. Which was more or less the fate the government had planned for him, so there would be no repercussions there. No one even wondered what had happened to Draco's bot or to Jack Solo's Anni-mah, who, it turned out, had terminally ceased to function on that same afternoon. The bots were contraband, and the government couldn't be responsible for strange collateral damage, aboard a station where Buonarrotti transits regularly played hell with local point phase.

Jack was inconsolable, but perhaps he was better off that way.

Orlando and Grace got their bikes back, and some useful numbers, which they sold through sys-op for a reasonable return on their investment. They spent most of the rest of their stay in their cabin, watching movies, setting themselves mountain race targets and trying to keep from bouncing off the walls. They didn't visit the saloon much, and they never went near the transit lounge. Shortly before they left on the Slingshot, they made a last excursion to the observation deck.

And there are the stars of Orion. Red Betelgeuse, brilliant blue Rigel, Bellatrix and Saiph; Mintaka, Alnilam and Alniak in the hunter's belt. At this exposure the jewel in the sword was not prominent, and it took a practiced eye to make out V380 Orionis... and the reflection nebula where you could find the birth-material called a Bok Globule, "a jet black cloud resembling a T lying on its side," that allegedly held stars so young they were barely the age of homo sapiens.

"We won't be that much further away from them," said Orlando.

They heard limping steps behind them, and L'Hibou joined them at the guard rail. "Not in entire nakedness," he said. "But trailing clouds of glory do we come. If stars are born, my young friends, do they have a life before birth, and after death?"

"I'm sorry it didn't work out," said Orlando. "I suppose you won't get your lightships. But I didn't know he would do that."

Grace shook her head. "I can't figure it," she said. "Light years, gravity equations, time and probability, non-location science... I can't think on that scale. I turn it into fantasies, the moment I start."

"All of science can do no more. And here in deep space, we just live out the same soap operas as you in the world below."

"Maybe it's for the best," suggested Orlando. "Maybe it's better if the gate stays closed, and the empires are contained on separate planets, in the old style."

"Tuh. It won't last. The lightships will come —Hm." The visor that hid L'Hibou's ruined eyes was fixed on the view; but they knew he was working up to one of those confessions that can only be made on the brink of a departure.

"When your partner gets killed," he remarked at last, "you're supposed to do something. Lana and I were together for a long time. In some ways I didn't like her much, but she was still my partner. Solo wasn't the murderer, not in my opinion. It was Draco who told Jack you were meeting Lana in the maintenance bay that night and that she was going to get you your bikes back. Draco knew that would make poor Jack crazy—Jack hated those damned bikes. And I knew Draco would try to go through the gate if he got the chance. I wanted the murderer to suffer. Well, that's all."

The Deep Spacer turned, and limped back into the drab corridors.

Orlando and Grace spared a shudder for the fate of Draco Fujima. But if the rule is that there are no rules, then Drac had nothing to complain about.

"One day," said Orlando, "we'll make the transition nobody can avoid."

"Yeah. And then maybe we'll walk where the stars are born."

And who can tell?