

WINNING PEACE

PAUL J. MCAULEY

B

orn in Oxford, England, in 1955, Paul J. McAuley now makes his home in London. A professional biologist for many years, he sold his first story in 1984, and has gone on to be a frequent contributor to *Interzone*, as well as to markets such as *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *SCI FICTION*, *Amazing*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Skylife*, *The Third Alternative*, *When the Music's Over*, and elsewhere.

McAuley is at the forefront of several of the most important subgenres in SF today, producing both “radical hard science fiction” and the revamped and retooled wide-screen Space Opera that has sometimes been called the New Space Opera, as well as dystopian sociological speculations about the very near future. He also writes fantasy and horror. His first novel, *Four Hundred Billion Stars*, won the Philip K. Dick Award, and his novel *Fairyland* won both the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the John W Campbell Award in 1996. His other books include the novels *Of the Fall*, *Eternal Light*, and *Pasquale's Angel*, *Confluence*—a major trilogy of ambitious scope and scale set ten million years in the future, comprised of the novels *Child of the River*, *Ancient of Days*, and *Shrine of Stars*—*Life on Mars*, *The Secret of Life*, and *Whole Wide World*. His short fiction has been collected in *The King of the Hill and Other Stories* and *The Invisible Country*, and he is the coeditor, with Kim Newman, of an original anthology, *In Dreams*. His most recent books include a new novel, *White Devils*, and a new collection, *Little Machines*. Coming up is a new novel, *Players*.

McAuley made his name as one of the best of the New Space Opera writers with novels such as *Four Hundred Billion Stars* and the *Confluence* trilogy, but in recent years he has created the Quiet War series as well, with stories such as “Second Skin,” “Sea Scene, With Monsters,” “The As-sassination of Faustino Malarte,” and others, about the aftermath and the consequences of an interplanetary war that ravages the solar system. In the tense and suspenseful story that follows, he deals with the aftermath and the consequences of another space war, an interstellar one this time, and shows us that if you can't manage to figure out a way to shake off the ghosts of the past, you may face a very limited future—such as: none at all.

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One day, almost exactly a year after Carver White started working for Mr. E. Z. Kanza's transport company, Mr. Kanza told him that they were going on a little trip—down the pipe to Ganesh Five. This was the company's one and only interstellar route, an ass-and-trash run to an abandoned-in-place forward facility,

bringing in supplies, hauling out pods packed with scrap and dismantled machinery, moving salvage workers to and fro. Carver believed that Mr. Kanza was thinking of promoting him from routine maintenance to shipboard work, and wanted to see if he had the right stuff. He was wrong.

The Ganesh Five system was a binary, an ordinary K1 star and a brown dwarf orbiting each other at a mean distance of six billion kilometers, roughly equivalent to the semimajor axis of Pluto's orbit around the Sun. The K1 star, Ganesh Five A, had a minor asteroid belt in its life zone, the largest rocks planofomed thousands of years ago by Boxbuilders, and just one planet, a methane gas giant named Sheffield by the Brit who'd first mapped the system, with glorious water-ice rings, the usual assortment of small moons, and, this was why a forward facility had been established there during the war between the Alliance and the Collective, no less than four wormhole throats.

The system had been captured by the Collective early in the war, and because one of its wormholes was part of a chain that included the Collective's New Babylon system, and another exited deep in Alliance territory, it had become an important staging and resupply area, with a big dock facility in orbit around Sheffield, and silos and tunnel networks buried in several of the moons. Now, two years after the defeat of the Alliance, the only people living there were employees of the salvage company that was stripping the docks and silos, and a small Navy garrison.

Carver White and Mr. Kanza flew there on the company's biggest scow, hauling eight passengers, a small tug, and an assortment of cutting and de-molition equipment. After they docked, Carver was left to kick his heels in the scow for six hours, until at last Mr. Kanza buzzed him and told him to get his ass over to the garrison. A marine escorted Carver to an office with a picture window overlooking the spine of the docks, which stretched away in raw sunlight toward Sheffield's green crescent and the bright points of three moons strung in a line beyond the great arch of its rings. This fabulous view was the first thing Carver saw when he swam into the room; the second was Mr. Kanza and a Navy officer lounging in sling seats next to it.

The officer was Lieutenant Rider Jackson, adjutant to the garrison commander. In his mid-twenties, maybe a year older than Carver, he had a pale, thin face, bright blue eyes, and a calm expression that didn't give any-thing away. He asked Carver about the ships he'd flown and the hours he'd logged serving in the Alliance Navy, questioned him closely about what had happened after Collective marines had boarded his crippled transport, the hand-to-hand fighting in the corridors and holds, how Carver had passed out from loss of blood during a last stand among the cold sleep coffins, how he'd woken up in a Collective hospital ship, a prisoner of war. The Alliance had requested terms of surrender sixty-two days later, having lost two battle fleets and more than fifty systems. By then, Carver had been patched up and sold as indentured labor to the pharm factories on New Babylon.

Rider Jackson said, “You didn’t tell the prize officer you were a flight engineer.”

“I gave him my name and rank and number. It was all he deserved to know.”

Carver was too proud to ask what this was all about, but he was pretty sure it had something to do with Mr. Kanza’s financial difficulties. Every-one who worked for Mr. Kanza knew he was in trouble. He’d borrowed to expand his little fleet, but he hadn’t found enough new business to service the loan, and his creditors were bearing down on him.

Rider Jackson said, “I guess you think you should have been sent home.”

“That’s what we did with our prisoners of war.”

“Because your side lost the war.”

“We’d have sent them back even if we’d won. The Alliance doesn’t treat people like property.”

Carver was beginning to like Rider Jackson. He seemed like the kind of man who preferred straight talk to evasion and exaggeration, who would stick to the truth even if it was uncomfortable or inconvenient. Which was prob-ably why he’d been sent to this backwater, Carver thought; forthright officers have a tendency to damage their careers by talking back to their superiors.

Mr. Kanza said, “If my data miner hadn’t uncovered his service record and traced him, he’d still be working in the pharm factories.”

Rider Jackson ignored this, saying to Carver, “You have a brother. He served in the Alliance Navy too.”

“That’s none of your business,” Carver said.

“Oh, but I think you’ll find it’s very much *my* business,” Mr. Kanza said.

Mr. E. Z. Kanza was a burly man with a shaved head and a short beard trimmed to a sharp point. He liked to think that he was a fair-minded, easy-going fellow, but exhibited most of the usual vices of people given too much power over others: he was arrogant and quick-tempered, and his smile masked a cruel and capricious sense of humor. On the whole, he didn’t treat his pilots and engineers too badly—they had their own quarters, access to good medi-cal treatment, and were even given small allowances they could spend as they chosen—but they were still indentured workers, with Judas bridges implanted in their spinal cords and no civil rights whatsoever, and Mr. Kanza was always ready to use his shock stick on

anyone who didn't jump to obey him.

Smiling his untrustworthy smile, Mr. Kanza said to Carver, "Jarred is two years younger than you, yes? He served on a frigate during the war, yes? Well, I happen to have some news about him."

Carver didn't say anything. He knew what had happened to Jarred, was wondering if this was one of Mr. Kanza's nasty little jokes.

Mr. Kanza appealed to Rider Jackson. "Do you know how long they last in those pharm factories before they cop an overdose or their immune systems collapse? No more than a year or two, three at the most. I saved this one from certain death, and has he ever thanked me? And do you want to bet he'll thank me when he learns about his brother?"

Rider Jackson said, "Don't make a game out of it. If you don't tell him, I will."

The two men stared at each other for a long moment. Then Mr. Kanza smiled and said, "I do believe you like him. I knew you would."

"Do what needs to be done."

Mr. Kanza conjured video from the air with a quick gesture. Here was Jarred White in a steel cell, wearing the same kind of black pajamas Carver had worn in the prison hospital, before he'd been sold into what the Collective called indentured labor and the Alliance called slavery. Here was Jarred standing in gray coveralls against a red marble wall in the atrium of Mr. Kanza's house.

Mr. Kanza told Carver, "Your brother was taken prisoner, just like you. One of my data miners traced him, and I bought out his contract. What do you think of that?"

Carver thought that the videos were pretty good fakes, probably disneyed up from his brother's military record. In both of the brief sequences, Jarred sported the same severe crew cut that was regulation for cadets in the Alliance Navy, not serving officers; when Carver had last seen him, his brother had grown his crew cut out into a flattop. That had been on Persopolis, the City of Our Lady of Flowers. Some twenty days later, Carver's drop ship had been crippled, and he'd been taken prisoner. Three days later Jarred had been killed in action.

The Collective didn't allow its POWs any contact with their families or anyone else in the Alliance; Carver had found out about his brother's death from one of the other prisoners of war working in the pharm factories. Jarred's frigate, the *Croatian*, had been shepherding ships loaded with evacuees from Eve's Halo when a Collective battleship traveling at a tenth the speed of light had smashed through the

convoy. The *Croatian* had been shredded by kinetic weapons and a collapsium bomblet had cooked off what was left: the ship had been lost with all hands. Carver had been hit badly by the news. Possessed by moments of unreasoning anger, he'd started to pick fights with other workers; finally, he attacked one of the guards. The woman paralyzed him with her shock stick, gave him a clinically methodical beating, and put him on punishment detail, shoveling cell protein from extraction pits. Carver would have died there if one of Mr. Kanza's data miners hadn't tracked him down.

After Mr. Kanza bought out his contract, Carver resolved to become a model worker, cultivate patience, and wait for a chance to escape; now, wondering if that chance had finally come, if he could turn Mr. Kanza's crude trick to his advantage, he stepped hard on his anger and held his tongue.

Mr. Kanza said to Rider Jackson, "You see? Not a speck of gratitude."

Rider Jackson turned his tell-nothing expression on Carver; Carver stared back at him through his brother's faked-up ghost.

The young lieutenant said to Mr. Kanza, "You're certain we can trust him?"

"I've had him a year. He's never given me any trouble, and he won't give us any trouble now," Mr. Kanza said, pointing a finger at Carver. "Can you guess why I went to all the trouble of buying out your brother's contract?"

Carver shrugged, as if it meant nothing to him.

Mr. Kanza said, "You really should show me some gratitude. Not only have I already saved your brother's life, but if everything works out, I'll void his contract, and void yours too. You'll both be free."

"Meanwhile, you're holding him hostage, to make sure that I'll do whatever it is you want me to do."

Mr. Kanza told Rider Jackson, "There it is. I have his brother as insurance, the tug will fly itself, and if he does get it into his head to try something stupid, I can intervene by wire. If worst comes to worst, I'll be the one short a flight engineer and a good little ship; as far as you're concerned, this is a risk-free proposition."

"As long as the Navy doesn't find out about it," Rider Jackson said.

"We've been over that," Mr. Kanza said.

Carver saw that there was something tense and wary behind Mr. Kanza's smile, and realized that he had worked up some reckless plan to get himself out of the hole, that he needed Rider Jackson's help to do it, and he needed Carver too.

“We’ve talked it up and down,” Mr. Kanza told Rider Jackson. “There’s no good reason why the Navy should know anything about this until you buy out your service.”

Rider Jackson studied him, then shrugged and said, “Okay.”

Just like that. Two days later, Carver was aboard Mr. Kanza’s tug, cooled down in hypersleep while the small ship aimed itself at the brown dwarf, Ganesh Five B.

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Mr. Kanza made extensive use of a data mining AI to track down skilled prisoners of war who were being used as common laborers, and to look for business opportunities overlooked by his rivals. The data miner had linked a news item about an alien and an astrophysicist who had disappeared after hiring a small yacht just before the beginning of the war with an academic article by the astrophysicist, Liu Chen Smith, that described an anomalous neutrino flux emitted by a pinpoint source within a permanent storm in the smoky atmosphere of a brown dwarf, Ganesh Five B. It was possible, the data miner suggested, that the alien, a !Cha that called itself Useless Beauty, had bankrolled an expedition to find out if the neutrino source was some kind of Elder Culture artifact.

Although most of the systems linked by wormhole networks were littered with the ruins of the cities, settlements, and orbital and free-floating habitats of Elder Culture species, these had been picked clean long ago by the dozens of species that preceded human colonization. Working examples of Elder Culture technology were fabulously rare and valuable. There was only a slim chance that the neutrino source was some kind of artifact, but if it was, and if Mr. Kanza could capture it, his financial difficulties would be over. He had one big problem: if the garrison that policed the Ganesh Five system found out about the neutrino source, the Navy would claim it for the state. That was where Rider Jackson, a criminal turned war hero, came in.

Rider Jackson had been born and raised on a reef circling a red dwarf star, Stein 8641. When their sheep ranch failed, Rider Jackson’s father ran off on a trade ship and his mother committed suicide. At age sixteen, Rider Jackson, their only child, inherited the responsibility of honoring his family’s debts. Our Thing, Stein 8641’s parliament, ruled that he should be indentured to his father’s chief creditors, the Myer family, until he had paid off all that was owed. Five years later, the day after war was declared between the Alliance and the Collective, he stole one of the Myer family’s ships and lit out, abandoning the ship in the sprawling docks of New Babylon and turning up the next day at a Navy recruiting office in the planet’s dusty capital, where he was promptly arrested for carrying false ID, a crime against the state that earned him ten years indentured labor. Soon afterward, having suffered two devastating defeats in quick succession, the Collective’s armed forces rounded up

everyone with freefall experience from the state's pool of indentured workers. Rider Jackson's sentence was commuted to ten years' service in the Navy. He fought in three campaigns in two different systems, and then his drop ship was hit by an Alliance raider and broke apart. Rider Jackson took charge of a gig and rescued seventy-eight warm bodies, including the drop ship's captain. His heroism won him his lieutenant's pip, a chestful of medals, and public acclaim, but his criminal history prevented him rising any higher, and at the end of the war, the Navy stashed him in the Ganesh Five garrison, with no hope of promotion or transfer, and nothing to do but listen to the self-pitying monologues of his commander, make random checks on ships passing between the wormholes, and file endless status reports. He still had seven years to serve, and after that he would be returned to Stein 8641, and the Myer family.

Mr. Kanza, knowing that Rider Jackson couldn't afford to buy out the unserved portion of his contract with the Navy, much less pay what he still owed the Myer family, had made him an offer he couldn't refuse: help chase the hot lead on what might be an Elder Culture artifact in return for fifty percent of any profit. Mr. Kanza brought to the deal the information he'd uncovered, a ship, and someone to fly it; Rider Jackson rejiggered the garrison's tracking station to cover up the flight of Mr. Kanza's tug, and used its deep space array to survey the brown dwarf. He found two things. The first was a microwatt beacon from an escape pod in orbit around Ganesh Five B. The second was that there was no longer any anomalous neutrino flux within the brown dwarf. It looked like Dr. Smith and the !Cha had captured the neutrino source, but then had got into some kind of trouble that had forced them to abandon their ship.

No wormhole throat orbited Ganesh Five B; the only way to reach it was through real space, a round trip of more than sixty days. Rider Jackson couldn't take leave of absence from his post and Mr. Kanza was unwilling to risk his life, and couldn't afford to hire a specialized, fully autonomous rescue drone because he was more or less broke and had exhausted all his lines of credit. His lightly modified tug, with Carver White riding along as troubleshooter, would have to do the job.

Carver learned all this while he helped Mr. Kanza prep the tug. He quickly realized that even if he brought back something that made Mr. Kanza and Rider Jackson the richest men alive, Mr. Kanza wouldn't keep his promise about freeing him; if he was going to survive this, he would have to find some way of exploiting the fact that he knew Mr. Kanza's story about holding Jarred hostage was a bluff. He also realized that he didn't have much chance of taking control of the tug and lighting out for somewhere other than the brown dwarf. He would be shut down in hypersleep for most of the trip, and the tug was controlled by an unhackable triumvirate of AIs that, sealed deep in the tug's keel, constantly checked each other's status. Not only that, but Mr. Kanza demonstrated with a ten-second burst of agony that he had hidden a shock stick in the tug too, and could use it to stimulate Carver's Judas bridge if it looked like he was going to cause trouble.

Carver's last thoughts before hypersleep closed him down were about whether he had done enough to make sure he could live through this; it was the first thing on his mind when he woke some thirty-one days later, in orbit around the brown dwarf.

The tug had discovered a scattering of debris, including hull plates, chunks of a fusion motor, and a human corpse in a pressure suit—it was clear that Dr. Smith hadn't survived the destruction of her ship—and it had also located the escape pod, which was tumbling in an oblate orbit that skimmed close to the outer edge of the brown dwarf's atmosphere before swinging away to more than twenty million kilometers at apogee. A blurry neutron density scan snatched by a throwaway probe revealed that the pod contained a !Cha's life tank, but its AI had refused to respond to the tug's attempts to shake hands with it, and there had been no response to an au-tomated hailing message either: there was no way of knowing if the !Cha, Useless Beauty, was dead or alive.

The tug played a brief voice-only message from Mr. Kanza, telling Carver that he was to suit up and go outside and retrieve Dr. Smith's corpse.

"She may be carrying something that will tell me what killed her. Also, her relatives may pay a finder's fee for the return of her body."

The tug was already matching delta vee with the body. By the time Carver had sent an acknowledgment to the message (it would take five and a half hours to reach Mr. Kanza), eaten his first meal since waking, and suited up, the tug and Dr. Smith's corpse were revolving around each other at a distance of just a few hundred meters.

Carver rode across the gap on a collapsible broomstick. Ganesh Five B filled half the sky, a dim red disk marbled by black clouds spun into ragged bands by its swift rotation; Dr. Smith's corpse was silhouetted against the baleful light of this failed star, tumbling head over heels, arms and legs akimbo. Her pressure suit was ruptured in several places, and covered by fine carbon particles blown into space by eruptions in the brown dwarf's magnetosphere; a fog of dislodged soot gathered around Carver as he fixed a line between the dead woman's utility belt and his broomstick.

After he'd towed the body back to the tug and stowed it in the cargo hold, Carver discovered a long tangle of transparent thread thinner than a human hair wrapped around Dr. Smith's right arm. He couldn't cut off a sample with any of his suit's tools; he had to unwind the entire tangle before he could bring it inside the tug and feed one end of it into the compact automated laboratory. He'd brought the computer from Dr. Smith's suit inside too, but its little mind was dead and its memory had been irretrievably damaged by years of exposure to the brown dwarf's magnetic and radiation fields.

The lab determined that the thread was woven from fullerene nanotubes doped

with atoms of beryllium, magnesium, and iron, and spun into long helical domains, was a room-temperature superconductor with the tensile properties of construction diamond: useful properties, but hardly unique. Even so, the fact that its composition didn't match any known fullerene superconductors was tantalizing, and although he told himself that it was most likely junk, debris in which Dr. Smith's body had become entangled after the destruction of her ship, Carver carefully wound the thread around a screwdriver, and shoved the screwdriver into one of the pouches of his p-suit's utility belt.

He had been hoping that the astrophysicist had survived; that she had been sleeping inside the escape pod; that after he'd woken her, she would have agreed to help him. He knew now that everything depended on whether or not the !Cha was alive or dead, and reckoned things would go easier if it was dead. Because if it was still alive, he would have to try to make a deal with it, and that was a lot riskier than trying to make a go of it on his own. For one thing, it was possible that the !Cha had murdered Dr. Smith because it wanted to keep whatever it was they'd found to itself. For another, like every other alien species, the !Cha made it clear that human beings didn't count for much. Ever since first contact, when the Jackaroo kicked off a global war on Earth and swindled the survivors out of rights to most of the solar system in exchange for a basic fusion drive and access to a wormhole network linking a couple of dozen lousy M-class red dwarf stars, aliens had been tricking, bamboozling, and manipulating the human race. In the long run, like other species before them, humans would either kill themselves off or stumble onto the trick of ascendancy and go on to wherever it is the Elder Cultures have gone, but meanwhile they were at the mercy of species more powerful than them, pawns in games whose rules they didn't know, and aims they didn't understand.

Carver had a little time to work out how to deal with the !Cha; before it retrieved the escape pod, the tug spawned dozens of probes and mapped the brown dwarf with everything from optical and microwave radar surveys to a quantum gravity scan. Ganesh Five B was a cool, small T-type, formed like any ordinary star by condensation within an interstellar gas cloud, but at just eight times the mass of Jupiter, too small to support ordinary hydrogen fusion. Gravitational contraction and a small amount of sluggish deuterium fusion in its core warmed its dusty atmosphere to a little under 1500 degrees centigrade. There were metal hydrides and methane down there, even traces of water. Sometimes, its bands of sooty clouds were lit by obscure chains of lightning thousands of kilometers long. Sometimes, when the tug passed directly above the top of a convection cell, those huge, slow elevators that brought up heat from the core, Carver caught a glimpse of the deep interior, a fugitive flash of brighter red flecked with orange and yellow.

And at every tenth orbit, the tug passed over the permanent storm at the brown dwarf's equator, the location of the anomalous neutrino flux that had drawn Dr. Smith and the !Cha to Ganesh Five B. The storm's pale lens was more than fifteen thousand kilometers across; probes dropped into it discovered a complex architecture of fractal clusters crawling and racheting around each other like the gears

of an insanely complicated mechanism bigger than the Earth. They also discovered that it was no longer emitting neutrinos, and it was breaking up along its edges—the tug’s AIs estimated that it would break up in less than ten years.

While the tug swung around the brown dwarf’s dim fires, Carver thought about the !Cha and what he had to do when the tug returned to Sheffield, and he lost himself in memories of his dead brother. He and Jarred had been close, two Navy brats following their parents from base to base, system to system. Although Jarred had been two years younger than Carver, he’d also been brighter and bolder, a natural leader, graduating at the top of his class in the Navy academy. The war had already begun when he graduated; the day after his passing-out parade, he followed Carver into active duty.

The last time Carver had seen Jarred, they’d spent three days together in the port city of Our Lady of the Flowers, Persopolis. It was the beginning of Jarred’s leave, the end of Carver’s. The night before Carver shipped out, they bar-hopped along the city’s famous Strand. The more Jarred drank, the more serious and thoughtful he became. He told Carver that whichever side won the war, both would have to work hard at the peace if humanity was to have any chance at surviving.

“War only happens when peace breaks down. That’s why peace is harder work, but more worthwhile.”

“We defeat the Collective, we impose terms,” Carver said. “Where’s the problem?”

“If we won the war and imposed terms on the Collective, forced it to change, it would be an act of aggression,” Jarred said. “The Collective would respond in kind and there would be another war. Instead of forcing change, we have to establish some kind of common ground.”

“We don’t have anything in common with those slavers.”

“We have more in common with them than with the Jackaroo, or the Pale, or the !Cha. And if we don’t find some way of living together,” Jarred said, “we’ll grow so far apart that we’ll end up destroying each other.”

He started to tell Carver about a loose network of people who were discussing how to broker a lasting peace, and Carver said that he didn’t want to hear about it, told Jarred he should be careful, what he and his friends were doing sounded a little like treason. Now, in the cramped lifeworld of the tug, endlessly falling around a failed star, six billion kilometers from the nearest human being, Carver thought about what his brother had said on their last night together. Carver had gone a little crazy when he’d heard about his brother’s death because it had been about as good and noble as an industrial accident. One machine had destroyed another, and Jarred and the rest of the *Croatian’s* crew had been incidental

casualties who'd had no chance to fight back or escape. It was a brutal irony that Jarred's death could help Carver win his freedom.

At last, the tug fired up its motor and slipped into a new orbit, creeping up behind the escape pod, swallowing its black pip whole, then firing up again, a long hard burn to achieve escape velocity from the brown dwarf's gravity well. It pinned Carver to his couch for more than two hours. When it was over, following Mr. Kanza's instructions to the letter, Carver suited up, went outside, and clambered through the access hatch of the cargo bay.

The pod's systems were in sleep mode; careful use of a handheld neutron density scanner confirmed that apart from a !Cha tank, it contained nothing out of the ordinary. If Dr. Smith and Useless Beauty had retrieved something from the brown dwarf, either it had been lost with their ship, or it was hidden inside the !Cha's impervious casing.

Carver didn't attempt to contact the !Cha. He knew that his only chance of escape lay in a narrow window of opportunity during the final part of the return journey; until then, he wanted to keep his plans to himself. He fixed telltales inside the cargo bay in case the !Cha decided to try to break out, locked it up, climbed back inside the lifestream, and sent a report to Mr. Kanza, and let the couch put him to sleep.

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Carver was supposed to remain in hypersleep until rendezvous with Mr. Kanza's scow, but he'd managed to reprogram the couch while prepping the tug. It woke him twelve hours early, four million kilometers out from Sheffield.

The !Cha's tank was still inside the escape pod, the pod was still sealed in the cargo bay, and the tug was exactly on course, falling ass-backward toward the gas giant. In a little over two hours, it would skim through the outer atmosphere in a fuel-saving aerobraking maneuver; meanwhile, the bulk of the planet lay between it and the Ganesh Five facility and Mr. Kanza's scow.

Carver had less than an hour before Mr. Kanza regained radio contact with the tug. While the tug's triumvirate of AIs threatened dire punishments Mr. Kanza had not trusted them to carry out, Carver climbed into his pressure suit, blew open the locked hatch using its explosive bolts, hauled himself to the cargo bay, and took just under fifteen minutes to rig a bypass and crank it open and slide inside.

He'd dropped a tab of military-grade amphetamine (it had cost him fifty days' pocket money), but he was still weak from the aftereffects of hyper-sleep, doozy, chilled to the bone. It took all his concentration to plug into the external port of the escape pod, scroll down the menu that lit up inside his visor, and hit the command that would open the hatch.

Nothing happened.

Carver knew then that the !Cha was awake; it must have locked the hatch from the inside. He was crouched on top of the escape pod in the wash of the gas giant's corpse light with nowhere else to go. Blowing the hatch had compromised the tug's integrity; if it plowed into Sheffield's upper atmosphere, it would break up. And in less than thirty minutes, it would reestablish contact with Mr. Kanza's scow. Mr. Kanza would have to alter the tug's course to save it, and then he would torture Carver until Carver's air supply ran out. So Carver did the only thing he could do: he opened all the com channels and started talking. He told the !Cha who he was, told it about Mr. Kanza and Lieutenant Rider, explained why he needed its help. He talked for ten minutes straight, and then a flat mechanical voice said, "Tell me exactly what you plan to do."

Relief washed clean through Carver, but he knew that he was not saved yet. With the feeling that he was tiptoeing over very thin ice, he said, "I plan to keep us both out of Mr. Kanza's clutches. I'd like to surrender to the Navy, but Mr. Kanza partnered up with an officer in the garrison here, so our only chance is to escape through one of the wormholes."

"But you do not have command of the tug."

"I don't need it."

Another pause. Then the flat voice said, "You have my interest."

Carver explained that the escape pod's motor was small but fully fueled, that with the tug's delta vee and a little extra assist it should be able to get them where they needed to go.

"I hope you understand that I'm not going to give you the flight plan. You'll have to trust me."

"You are afraid that I killed Dr. Smith. You are afraid that I will kill you, if I know the details of your plan."

"It crossed my mind, but you're a better bet than my owner."

"If I wanted you dead, I would not need to do it myself. Your owner will do that for me."

Carver wondered if that was an attempt at humor. "He'll kill both of us."

"He will not kill me if he believes that I have something he wants."

“If you do have something, he’ll kill you and take it. And if you don’t, he’ll kill you anyway.”

Carver sweated out another pause. Then, with a grinding vibration he felt through his pressure suit, the hatch of the escape pod opened.

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Carver powered up the pod’s systems, moved it out of the cargo bay, and adjusted its trim with a few puffs of the attitude jets, then fired up its motor. Ten minutes later, the tiny star of the dock facility dawned beyond the cres-cent and rings of the gas giant. The comm beeped. Mr. Kanza said, “That won’t do you any good, you son of a whore.”

“Watch and learn,” Carver said.

“Listen to me carefully. If you don’t do exactly as I say, your brother is a dead man.”

“My brother was killed in action, along with everyone else on his ship.”

Carver had control of the escape pod and was out of range of the shock stick hidden on the tug: he could say whatever he liked to Mr. Kanza. It was a good feeling. When Mr. Kanza started to rage at him, Carver told him that he was going to have to find some other way of covering his debts, and cut him off.

Far behind the pod, the tug lit its motor; no doubt Mr. Kanza was flying it by wire, hoping either to bring it close enough to use the shock stick on Carver, or ram him. He told Useless Beauty that if whatever it had found at the brown dwarf could be used as a weapon, now was the time to let him know.

“And don’t tell me that you didn’t find anything: there’s no longer a neutrino source in that strange storm. You fished out some kind of Elder Culture artifact, and it did a number on your ship.”

“One of the Elder Cultures may have had something to do with it,” Use-less Beauty said, “but it was not an artifact.”

The squat black cylinder of its tank was jammed into the space between the two acceleration couches, three pairs of limbs folded up in a way that reminded Carver of a praying mantis. He tried to picture what was inside, a cross between a squid and a starfish swimming in oily, ammonia-rich water, the tough, nerve-rich tubules that ordinarily connected it to puppet juve-niles plugged into the systems of its casing. It was even harder to picture what it was thinking, but Carver was pretty sure that his survival was at the bottom of its list of priorities.

He said, “If it wasn’t an artifact, a machine or whatever, what was it?”

“A mathematical singularity from a universe where the laws and constants of nature are very different from ours. A little like the software of your computers, but alive, self-aware, and imbued with a strong survival instinct. Perhaps an Elder Culture brought it through a kind of wormhole between its universe and ours. Perhaps it is a traveler unable to find its way home. In any event, it was trapped within the brown dwarf, and created the storm by epitaxy—using its own form as a template to make something approximating the conditions of its home, just as my tank contains a small portion of the ocean where my species evolved. Dr. Smith and I were able to capture it, but it broke free after we brought it aboard our ship. At once, it began to consume the structure of the ship. Dr. Smith went outside and successfully cut it away, but by then the fusion motor had been badly damaged, and it began to overheat. When Dr. Smith attempted to repair it, the cooling system exploded, and ruptured her suit. She died before she could get back inside, and I was forced to use the escape pod. I got away only a few minutes before the ship was destroyed.”

“What happened to the thing you found?”

“If the neutrino flux is no longer detectable, I must assume that it was unable to return to the brown dwarf. Without a sufficient concentration of matter to weave a suitable habitat around itself,” Useless Beauty said, “it would have evaporated.”

It was a good story, and Carver believed about half it. He was pretty certain that the !Cha and Dr. Smith had captured something, Elder Culture artifact, weird mathematics, and that it had begun to destroy or transform their ship—it would explain why the composition of the thread Carver had found wrapped around Dr. Smith’s arm didn’t match anything in the library of the ship’s lab—but Carver was pretty sure that Dr. Smith hadn’t died in some kind of accident. It was more likely that Useless Beauty had murdered her because it wanted to keep what they’d found to itself and that prize was hidden somewhere inside its tank. But because he needed the !Cha’s help—the casing of its tank was tougher than diamond, and its limbs were equipped with all kinds of gnarly tools, trying to fight it would be like going head to head with a battle drone—he didn’t give voice to his doubts, said that it was a damn shame about losing Dr. Smith and the ship, he hoped to bring it better luck.

Useless Beauty did not reply, and its silence stretched as the escape pod hurtled toward Sheffield’s ring system. Carver sipped sweetened apple pulp, watched the tug grow closer, watched the scow change course, half a million kilometers ahead, watched his own track on the navigational plot. He wasn’t a pilot, but he knew his math, and his plan depended on nothing more complicated than ordinary Newtonian mechanics, a straightforward balance between gravity and distance and time and delta vee.

That’s what he tried to tell himself, anyhow.

The rings filled the sky ahead, dozens of pale, parallel arcs hundreds of ki-lometers across, separated by gaps of varying widths. At T minus ten seconds, Carver handed control to the pod's AI. It lit the pod's motor at exactly T0. Two seconds later, the comm beeped: another message from Mr. Kanza.

Carver ignored it.

The tug was changing course too, but Carver was almost on the ring system now, falling toward a particular gap he'd chosen with the help of the escape pod's navigational system. He watched it with all of his concentra-tion—he was finding it hard to believe in Newtonian mechanics now his life depended on it.

But there it was, at the edge of one of the arcs of ice and dust: a tiny grain flashing in raw sunlight: a shepherd moon. In less than a minute, it resolved into a pebble, a boulder, a pitted siding of dirty ice. As it flashed past, the pod's AI lit the motor again. The brief blip of acceleration and the momen-tum the pod had stolen from the moon made a small change in its delta vee; as it swung around the gas giant, the difference between the trajectory of the pod and the tug widened perceptibly.

The tug didn't have enough fuel to catch up with the pod now, but beyond Sheffield, Mr. Kanza's scow was changing course, and a few minutes later, a Navy cutter shot away from the dock facility, and the comm chan-nels were suddenly alive with chatter: the salvage company's gigs and tugs; a couple of ships in transit between the wormholes; the Navy garrison, order-ing both Mr. Kanza and Carver White to stand to and await interception.

Carver couldn't obey even if he wanted to. Less than a quarter of the pod's fuel remained and it was traveling very fast now, boosted by the slingshot through Sheffield's steep gravity well. With Mr. Kanza's scow and the Navy cutter in pursuit, it hurtled toward one of the wormhole throats. Carver had no doubt that the scow would follow him through, but he believed he had enough of an edge to make it to where he wanted to go, especially now that the Navy was involved. Someone in the garrison must have discovered Rider Jackson's deal with Mr. Kanza, and that meant the cutter would be more likely to try to stop Mr. Kanza's scow first.

The wormhole throat was a round dark mirror just over a kilometer across, twinkling with photons emitted by asymmetrical pair decay, framed by a chunky ring that housed the braid of strange matter that kept the throat open, all this embedded in the flat end of a chunk of rock that had been sculpted to a smooth cone by the nameless Elder Culture that had built the wormhole network a couple of million years ago. The pod hit it dead center, the radio chatter cut off, light flared, and the pod emerged halfway around the galaxy, above a planet shrouded in dense white clouds, shining pitilessly bright in the glare of a giant F5 star.

The planet, Texas IX, had a hot, dense, runaway greenhouse atmosphere—even Useless Beauty's tank could not have survived long in the searing storms that

scoured its surface—but it also had a single moon that had been planofomed by Boxbuilders. That was where Carver wanted to go. He took back control of the pod and reconfigured it, extending wide braking surfaces of tough polycarbon, and lit the motor. It was a risky maneuver—if the angle of attack was too shallow, the pod would skip away into deep space with no hope of return, and if it was too steep, the pod would burn up—but aerobraking was the only way he could shed enough velocity.

Like a match scratching a tiny flare across a wall of white marble, the pod cut a chord above Texas IX's cloud tops. Carver was buffeted by vibration and pinned to the couch by deceleration that peaked at eight gees. He screamed into the vast shuddering noise; screamed with exhilaration and fear. Useless Beauty maintained its unsettling silence. Then the flames that filled the forward cameras died back and the pod rose above the planet's nightside.

The stars came out, all at once.

Useless Beauty's affectless voice said, "That was interesting."

"We aren't down yet," Carver said. He was grinning like a fool. He believed that the worst was over.

The escape pod fell away from Texas IX, heading out toward its moon. It was almost there when Mr. Kanza's scow overtook it.

* * * *

Soon after it had formed, while its core had been still molten, something big had smashed into Texas IX's solitary moon. It had excavated a wide, deep basin in one side of the moon, and seismic waves traveling through the crust and core had focused on the area antipodal to the impact, jostling and lifting the surface, breaking crater rims and intercrater areas into a vast maze of hills and valleys, opening vents that flooded crater floors with fresh lava. That was where the escape pod came down, a thousand kilometers from the moon's only settlement, a hundred or so hardscrabble ranches strung along the shore of a shallow, hypersaline sea.

The scow, shooting past at a relative velocity of twenty clicks per second, had cooked the pod with a microwave burst, killing the pod's AI and crippling most of its control systems. Although the pod's aerobraking surfaces gave Carver a little leeway as it plowed through the moon's thin atmosphere, it smashed down hard and skidded a long way across a lava plain; despite the web holding Carver to the couch and the impact foam that flooded the pod's interior, he was knocked unconscious.

When he came around a few minutes later, the pod was canted at a steep angle, the hatch was open, and Useless Beauty was gone. Carver was bruised over

most of his body and his nose was tender and bleeding, possibly broken, but he was not badly hurt. He clawed his way through dissolving strands of impact foam and clambered out of the hatch, discovered that the pod lay at the end of a long furrow, its skin scarred, scraped, and discolored, and radiating an intense heat he could feel through his pressure suit. Big patches of spindly desert vegetation burned briskly on either side, lofting long reefs of smoke into the white sky.

Useless Beauty's tank stood on top of a ridge of overturned dirt, its black cylinder balanced on four many-jointed legs, two more limbs raised as if in prayer toward the sky. Carver was surprised and grateful to see it; he'd thought that the !Cha had taken the opportunity to make a run for it.

"This is only a brief respite," Useless Beauty said, as Carver clambered up the ridge. "Your owner's ship has swung far beyond this moon, but it is braking hard. It will soon be back."

"Then we can't stay here," Carver said. "We have to find a place to hide out until someone from the settlement comes to investigate."

The tank's two upper limbs swung down, aiming clusters of tools and sensors straight at Carver, and Useless Beauty said, "This is the part of your plan that I do not understand. This moon is owned by the Collective. You are a runaway slave. Surely they will side with your master. And if they do not, they will claim you for themselves."

Here it was. Carver took a breath and said, "Not if you claim me first."

After a short pause, Useless Beauty said, "So that is why you needed me."

"As we say in the Alliance, one good turn deserves another. I rescued you; now it's your turn to rescue me."

Throwing himself on the mercy of the !Cha was the biggest risk of the whole enterprise. Carver had never felt so scared and alone as he did then, waiting out another of Useless Beauty's silences while hot sunlight beat down through drifts of smoke, and Mr. Kanza's scow grew closer some-where on the other side of the sky.

At last, the !Cha said, "You are very persistent."

"Does that mean you'll help me?"

"I admit that I want to see what happens next."

Carver supposed that he would have to take that as a "yes." Low hills shim-mered in the middle distance. The ruins of a Boxbuilder city were scattered across their sere slopes like so many strings of beads. He pointed at the ruins and

said, “As soon as I’ve gotten rid of this pressure suit, we start walking.”

The !Cha’s four-legged cylinder moved with easy grace through the shimmering desert. Carver, wearing only his suit liner and boots, a pouch of water slung over his shoulder, had to jog to keep up. The air was thin, and the fat sun beat down mercilessly, but he reveled in the feeling of the sun’s heat on his skin and dry wind in his hair, in the glare of the harsh landscape. Every-thing seemed infinitely precious, a chain of diamond-sharp moments. He had never before felt so alive as he did then, with death so close at his heels.

As Carver and the !Cha climbed toward a ravine that snaked between interlocking ridges, a double sonic boom cracked across the sky. The scow had arrived. But Carver wasn’t ready to give up yet, and there were plenty of places to hide in the ruins. Chains of hollow cubes spun from polymer and rock dust climbed the slopes on either side, piled on top of each other, running along ridges, bridging narrow valleys: a formidable labyrinth with thousands of nooks and crannies that led deep into the hills, where he and Useless Beauty could hide out until some sort of rescue party arrived from the colony. For a little while, he began to believe that his plan might work, but then he and the !Cha reached the end of a chain of cubes at the top of a ridge, and found Rider Jackson waiting for them.

The young officer put his pistol on Carver and said, “You led us a pretty good chase, but you forgot one thing.”

He was wearing a black Navy flight suit with a big zip down the front and pockets patching the chest and legs; that know-everything-tell-nothing expression blanked his face.

“I did?”

“You forgot you’re an indentured worker. Your Judas bridge led me straight to you. Your owner will be here as soon as he can find a place to park his ship. I reckon you’ve got just enough time to tell me your side of the story.”

While the scow lowered toward a setback below the ridge, Carver told Rider Jackson more or less everything that had happened out at the brown dwarf. Rider Jackson knew most of it, of course, because he’d seen the foot-age and data the tug had sent to Mr. Kanza, but he listened patiently and said, when Carver was finished, “I didn’t know he was lying about your brother. If I had, I would have put an end to this a lot sooner.”

“He was probably lying about a lot of things.”

“Like giving me a fifty percent share in the prize, uh?”

“Like giving you any share at all.”

“You might well be right,” Rider Jackson said, and looked for the first time at Useless Beauty’s tank. “Care to explain why you came along for the ride?”

“I have nothing to give you,” it said.

“I bet you don’t. But that wasn’t what I asked,” Rider Jackson said, and that was when Mr. Kanza arrived.

Grim and angry and out of breath, he bulled straight across the roof-less cube and stuck his shock stick in Carver’s face. Carver couldn’t help flinching and Mr. Kanza smiled and said, “Tell me what the !Cha found and where it is, and maybe I won’t have to use this.”

Rider Jackson said, “There’s no point threatening him. You want to know the truth, figure out how to get the !Cha to talk straight.”

Mr. Kanza stepped back from Carver and aimed the shock stick at Rider Jackson. “You were indentured once, just like him. Is that why you’re taking his side? I knew it was a mistake to let you go chase him down.”

“You could have come with me,” Rider Jackson said, “but you were happy to let me take the risk.”

“He told you. He told you what that thing found and you made a deal with him.”

“You’re making a bad mistake.”

The two men were staring at each other, Rider Jackson impassive, Mr. Kanza angry and sweating. Saying, “I bet you tasted the stick in your time. You’ll taste it again if you don’t drop that pistol.”

Rider Jackson said, “I guess we aren’t partners anymore.”

“You’re right,” Mr. Kanza said, and zapped him.

Carver was caught by the edge of the stick’s field. His Judas bridge kicked in, his muscles went into spasm, hot spikes hammered through his skull, and he fell straight down.

Rider Jackson didn’t so much as twitch. He put his pistol on Mr. Kanza and said, “The Navy took out my bridge when I signed up. Set down that stick and your pistol, and I’ll let you walk away.”

“We’re partners.”

“You said it yourself: not anymore. If you start walking now, maybe you can find somewhere to hide before the cutter turns up.”

Mr. Kanza screamed and threw the shock stick at Rider Jackson and made a grab for the pistol stuck in his utility belt. Rider Jackson shot him. He shot Mr. Kanza twice in the chest and the man sat down, winded and dazed but still alive: his pressure suit had stopped the flechettes. He groped for his pistol and Rider Jackson said, “Don’t do it.”

“Fuck you,” Mr. Kanza said and jerked up his pistol and fired it wildly. Rider Jackson didn’t flinch. He took careful aim and shot Mr. Kanza in the head, and the man fell sideways and lay still.

Rider Jackson turned and put his pistol on Useless Beauty’s black cylinder and said calmly, “I don’t suppose this can punch through your casing, but I could shoot off your limbs one by one and set you on a fire.”

There was a brief silence. Then the !Cha said, “You will need a very hot fire, and much more time than you have.”

“I have more time than you think,” Rider Jackson said. “I know Dana Sabah, the woman flying that cutter. She’s a good pilot, but she’s inexperienced and too cautious. Right now, she’ll be watching us from orbit, waiting to see how it plays out before she makes her move.”

“If she does not come, then the settlers will rescue me.”

“Uh-uh. Even if the settlers know about us, which I doubt, Dana will have told them to back off. I reckon I have more than enough time to boil the truth out of you.”

Useless Beauty said, “I have already told the truth.”

Carver got to his feet and told Rider Jackson, “It doesn’t matter if it’s telling the truth or not. All that matters is that we can escape in the scow. But first, I want you to drop your pistol.”

Rider Jackson looked at the pistol Carver was holding—Mr. Kanza’s pistol—and said, “I wondered if you’d have the guts to pick it up. The question now is, do you have the guts to use it?”

“If I have to.”

“Look at us,” Rider Jackson said. “I’m an officer in the Collective Navy; you’re a prisoner of war sold into slavery, trying to get home.. .We could fight a

duel to see who gets the scow. It would make a good ending to the story, wouldn't it?"

Carver smiled and said, "It would, but this isn't a story."

"Of course it's a story. Do you know why !Cha risk their lives chasing after Elder Culture artifacts?"

"It's something to do with sex."

"That's it. Back in the oceans of their homeworld, male !Cha constructed elaborate nests to attract a mate. The strongest, those most likely to produce the fittest offspring, made the biggest and most elaborate nests. Simple, straight-ahead Darwinism. The !Cha left their homeworld a long time ago, but the males still have to prove their worth by finding something novel, something no other male has. They have a bad jones for Elder Culture junk, but these days they get a lot of useful stuff from us too."

"It's lying about what it found," Carver said. "It told me it lost it, but I know it has it hidden away inside that tank."

Rider Jackson shook his head. "If it still had it, it would have killed you and paid off Mr. Kanza. And it wouldn't have called up the garrison back at Ganesh Five."

"It did? Is that why the cutter came after us?"

"Why do you think traffic control spotted you so quickly? It told them what you were up to, and it told them all about my deal with Mr. Kanza too. Dana Sabah told me all about it when she tried to get me to surrender," Rider Jackson said. "I guess our friend thought that involving the Navy would make the story more exciting."

"Son of a bitch. And I thought it was on my side because it owes me its life."

"As far as it's concerned, it doesn't owe you anything. The only reason it stuck with you is because you have something it needs. Something as unique as any ancient artifact, something it believes will win it a mate: the story of how you tried to escape."

"Your own story is just as good, Lieutenant Jackson," Useless Beauty said. "The two of you are enemies, as you said. Fight your duel. The winner will take me with him—I will pay well for it."

Rider Jackson looked at Carver and smiled. "What do you think?"

“I think the war is over.” Carver was smiling too, remembering something Jarred had said. That peace was harder work than war, but more worthwhile.

Useless Beauty said, “I do not understand. You are enemies.”

Rider Jackson stuck his pistol in his belt. “Like he said, the war is over. Besides, we both want the same thing.”

Carver lowered the pistol he’d taken off Mr. Kanza’s body and told the !Cha, “You’re like Mr. Kanza. You think you own us, but you don’t understand us.”

“You must take me with you,” Useless Beauty said.

“It wants to find out how the story ends,” Rider Jackson told Carver.

“I will pay you well,” Useless Beauty said.

Carver shook his head. “We don’t need your money. We have the scow, and I have about thirty meters of a weird thread I took off Dr. Smith’s body. It’s superconducting and very strong, and I can’t help wondering if it’s something you and her pulled out of Ganesh Five B.”

“I told you the truth about what we found,” Useless Beauty said. “It escaped us and destroyed our ship, but it did not survive. However, I admit this thread may be of interest. I must examine it, of course, but if it is material transformed during the destruction of the ship, I may be willing to purchase it.”

“That’s what I thought,” Carver said. “It may not be an Elder Culture artifact, but it could be worth something. And maybe the data from the probes I dropped into Ganesh Five B might be worth something too.”

“I may be willing to purchase that too,” Useless Beauty said. “As a souvenir.”

“What do you think?” Carver said to Rider Jackson. “Think we’ll get a better price on the open market.”

“I can force you to take me,” Useless Beauty said.

“No you can’t,” Carver said.

“And even if you could, it would ruin the ending of your story,” Rider Jackson said. “I’m sure the settlers or the Navy will rescue you, for a price.”

There was a long moment of silence. Then Useless Beauty said, “I would like to know what happens after you escape. I will pay well.”

“If we escape,” Carver said. “We have to get past the cutter.”

“Dana Sabah’s a good pilot, but I’m better,” Rider Jackson said. “I reckon you are too.”

“Before we do this, we need to work out where we’re going.”

“That’s pretty easy, given that you’re an indentured worker and the Navy wants my ass. Think that Kanza’s old boat will get us to the Alliance?”

“It just might.”

The two men grinned at each other. Then they ran for the scow.

* * * *